The Chinese Queer Glocalisation of TV Formats in the New Millennium

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television Studies

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June 2020
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List of abbreviations

CCP: Chinese Communist Party
CCTV: China Central TV
EBU: European Broadcasting Union
HTV: Hunan TV
IYATO: If You Are the One
JSTV: Jiangsu Satellite TV
LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer
MRFT: The Ministry of Radio, Film and Television
NRTA: The National Radio and Television Administration
PiP: The Picture in Picture Visual Editing/Production Technique.
PK: Player Killing
PRC: The People’ Republic of China
SVG: Super Voice Girl
SAPPRFT: The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television
SARFT: The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television
TJS: The Jinxing Show
WTO: World Trade Organization
YFSF: Your Face Sounds Familiar
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound gratitude to my awesome supervisors in the Department of Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick, Prof. Rachel Moseley and Prof. Karl Schoonover, for their continuous, tremendous support of my research. The completion of this doctoral project would not have been possible without their patience, motivation and immense knowledge. Their guidance helped me overcome the numerous obstacles I have had during my years at Warwick and made the writing of the thesis a truly fruitful journey. I also feel extremely grateful for the time and generous help of my internal reader, Prof. Michele Aaron, and my external examiner, Prof. Victor Fan. In addition, I thank the generous conference grants, international scholarship and early career research fellowship from the University of Warwick for supporting my doctoral research and overseas academic activities.

I am deeply indebted to my academic friends, colleagues and mentors who have walked me through early, rough stages of my academic life with their generosity, intelligence, enthusiasm and warm encouragement: Prof. Hongwei Bao, Prof. Chris Berry, Prof. Li Guo, Prof. Derek Hird, Dr. Penn Ip, Prof. Earl Jackson, Prof. Henry Jenkins, Prof. Maud Lavin, Prof. Helen Leung, Prof. Wing-Fai Leung, Prof. Rebecca Lind, Prof. Lim Song Hwee, Prof. Kam Louie, Prof. Liang Luo, Prof. Christopher Lupke, Prof. Gina Marchetti, Prof. Fran Martin, Prof. Mark McLelland, Dr. Lori Morimoto, Prof. Eve Ng, Prof. Katherine Sender, Prof. Geng Song, Prof. Wanning Sun, Prof. James Welker, Prof. Angela Wai Ching Wong, Prof. Jim Wren, Prof. Hui Faye Xiao, Dr. Ling Yang, Prof. Audrey Yue, Prof. Yiman Wang, Dr. Alvin Wong, Prof. Alexander Zahlten, Prof. Paola Giulia Zamperini and many others.

Finally, I would like to thank my wonderful parents, Xiaoren Zhao and Shuyun Huang, for their love, big heart, sympathetic ear and companionship that have sustained me during the good and bad times.
Declaration

This thesis consists entirely of my own work. It has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

An earlier, short version of Chapter Three (8000 words) have been published as:

An earlier version of Section 6 in Chapter One (1300 words) has been published as:

Some content from Section 3.3 in the Introductory Chapter has been published as:

Some content from Section 5 in Chapter One and Section 2 in the Concluding Chapter are included in a contribution to the anthology forthcoming in September 2019:
Abstract

This thesis examines the concurrent arrival of a burgeoning queer televisual culture during the post-2000 boom in Chinese TV format adaptation and innovation. It focuses on contemporary Chinese provincial station-produced variety shows that are originally based on global TV formats. Drawing on global TV studies, global queering theory, Chinese feminist theories and media and cultural globalisation research, I develop a ‘queer-glocalisation’ framework to doubly debunk the static polarity prevalent in global queer and TV studies. My theoretical approach works to explore the complex ways in which multiple forces and factors associated with the ideologies and power struggles of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality and class, at both global and local levels, are intertwined and co-constitutive in this process. I present a critical analysis of the Chinese glocalisation of TV formats in three often queerly connotated variety genres: talk shows, reality TV and impersonation shows. Using specific case studies from each genre, I ask why and how certain formatted programmes have become a queer female ‘runway’, so to speak, yet sometimes also a worrying and ambivalent one. In addition, the paradoxes and promises of contemporary Chinese lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) culture in its conversations and contestations with local normative ideologies and global flows of TV and queer knowledge are also interrogated. By so doing, I construct a comprehensive thesis for understanding the ways in which queer meanings emerge, reside in, contribute to and flow through predominantly heteronormative, patriarchal public culture and mainstream spaces. Ultimately, my research in this thesis reveals a dual process of contemporary Chinese queer-glocalist TV culture that has been enacted by and is continually negotiating with both the dominant industrial, technological and social-political forces of mainstream Chinese society and the nonnormatively gendered and sexualised desires and tactics of TV producers, performers, celebrities and audiences.
Introduction

1. The queer glocalisation of TV formats in post-2000 China

With a history of sixty years, Chinese TV of the 21st century has become widely regarded in academic literature as a productive, yet also contentious sociocultural site. Post-2000 Chinese TV culture amalgamates, adapts and reworks media information and resources from around the world.¹ There is little doubt that global TV formats—sets of ‘knowledge systematically and consciously assembled to facilitate the future [televisual] adaptation’ across geocultural boundaries—have played an indispensable role in the economic, cultural and social-political transformations of TV in contemporary China.²

In this thesis, I consider this landscape of China’s global TV by exploring the convergence of global flows of gender and sexual knowledge and televisual formats in China. My thesis sets its research against a backdrop that features the concurrent arrival of a burgeoning queer televisual culture during the post-2000 boom in Chinese TV format adaptation and innovation. It examines contemporary Chinese provincial station-produced variety shows that are originally based on foreign TV formats and circulated in a speedily marketised, globalised society. My examination strives to show that the televisual, cultural and contextual dimensions of the shows are characterised by what I term a ‘queer glocalisation’ of TV formats. I explain this concept in great detail in the remainder of this introductory chapter. My research diverges from predominant structural and industrial analyses of the political and economic characteristics of Chinese TV formats in an internationalised media system. Instead, I use an alternative ‘queer-glocalist’ lens for the study of Chinese televisual representations of and negotiations with nonnormative gender and sexuality. My analysis of China’s provincial TV stations focuses

¹ See, for example, Ying Zhu and Chris Berry, eds, TV China (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); and Yuezhi Zhao, Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998). This thesis only considers television in Mainland China. The social-political contexts, linguistic features and technological developments of TV in other Chinese-speaking and Sinophone regions, such as Hong Kong (a special administrative region of PRC after 1997) and Taiwan (the Republic of China), are remarkably diverse and different from those in Mainland China. Throughout the study, my uses of ‘China’ and ‘Chinese’ mainly refer to the sociocultural discourses of Mainland China.

on the active roles local TV producers, performers, audiences and censors play in the various stages of TV production and adaptation processes. In particular, I inspect the multi-layered interconnectedness and tensions between the ‘global’, the ‘national’ and the ‘local’ embedded in and mediated through certain formats and genres appropriated by provincial TV stations. My analysis thus contributes to existing scholarly debates on both the globalisation and localisation of TV without overlooking the power asymmetry between the global and the local in Chinese media cultures. I address this point in greater detail in the next part of this section through an exposition of the post-1978 liberalisation of Chinese TV. Moreover, to interrogate the intertwining of patriarchal and heteronormative ideals in mainstream Chinese public and popular cultures, I pay special attention to nonnormative female genders and sexualities enacted, imitated, commodified and contested on Chinese formatted TV shows of the new millennium. With combined televisual-cultural discourse analyses, I explore the intricate and contradictory aspects of this emerging ‘queer TV’ in contemporary China.

As Chinese media scholar Lauren Gorfinkel finds, in its early years, TV broadcasting was conceptualised as ‘an ideological weapon’ in the course of socialist China’s political competition and tension with Taiwan in the Cold War era. Gorfinkel notes that TV transmission was only possible in China’s capital city, Beijing, serving as the ‘throat and tongue’ of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP); it was used ‘to fight imperialism, revisionism and capitalism, as well as for intra-party struggles’. In the course of China’s post-revolutionary (post-1978) economic-political transformation into a neoliberal,

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4 Ibid.
globalist, yet still authoritarian, nation-state, its TV system gradually became industrialised and financially independent of the central government.

Wanning Sun and Lauren Gorfinkel’s study shows that in the 1980s, China’s TV system was greatly restructured and expanded to a national scale, with hundreds of new TV stations established by the central, provincial, municipal and county levels of broadcasters. They argue that this quick growth in the number of broadcasters and the scaling up of its system signaled a breakdown of the ‘unequal central-peripheral relationship’ between national and local media. While the national-level station, China Central TV (CCTV), has remained the ‘mouthpiece of the Party’ and more directly controlled by the political authorities, TV stations at other levels enjoyed different degrees of freedom in administration, production, ownership and financing.

In particular, as discussed by Gorfinkel in her 2018 monograph, *Chinese Television and National Identity Construction: The Cultural Politics of Music Entertainment Programmes*, ‘entertainment’ (yule), which was once considered a ‘dirty bourgeois word’ in socialist, revolutionary China, began to be widely used as an effective way to ‘attract audience[s]’ during China’s marketisation. Chinese media scholar Michael Curtin also notes that, in the early 1990s, China officially entered its ‘socialist market economy’ period. This political-economic transformation of Chinese society has been marked by what Wanning Sun and Yuezhi Zhao refers to as ‘an ambiguous and paradoxical process that has witnessed the progressive applications of the neoliberal strategies of market rationalization on the one hand, and the

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5 Following Roland Robertson’s problematizing of Anthony Giddens’s conceptualisation of globalisation as a ‘consequence of modernity’, I use the terms, ‘globality’/’globalist’, to refer to ‘the general condition which has facilitated the diffusion of modernity … [and] been generally defined by the inter-penetration of geographically distinct “civilisations”’. For a detailed discussion on the meanings of ‘globalisation’ and ‘globality’, see Roland Robertson, ‘Globalisation or Glocalisation?’, *The Journal of International Communication* 18:2 (2012), pp. 193-194.
7 Ibid.
8 Gorfinkel, *Chinese Television and National Identity Construction*, p. 55; and ibid., p. 25.
continuing and indeed intensified (re)articulation of China’s socialist legacies on the other’. Since then, TV entertainment that does ‘not disturb the social and political stability of the nation on which the CCP’s legitimacy was based’ has been not only allowed but also encouraged. For instance, provincial stations are allowed to ‘air nationally via satellite’ and broadcast ‘entertainment television dramas that focu[s] on the lives of ordinary people’. Along with the growing popularity of provincial TV among the audience, the competition for ratings between Central and provincial TV stations have become fiercer.

The significant role of TV—a highly commercialised, pop cultural form—in China’s political propaganda of modernity, nationalism and globalisation has been further exploited in subtle ways. This continual yet revised propagandistic feature of TV is epitomised in the importation and adaptation of foreign programmes. This ‘globalisation’ of Chinese TV content during the market-economy age in fact amplifies what Yuezhi Zhao and Zhenzhi Guo identify as TV’s function as the ‘double articulation of political and commercial propaganda and popular culture’. One notable example since the late 1980s has been the industry’s importation and subsequent adaptation of foreign soap operas. The narratives of the soap operas often imbricate patriarchal, nationalistic imaginaries of Chinese manhood and heterosexual romance. Since the late 1990s, another case in point has been China’s localisation and hybridisation of reality TV formats that originated in Western

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15 Sun and Gorfinkel, ‘Television, Scale and Place-Identity’, p. 25.
and East Asian countries. As Anthony Y. H. Fung points out, the production and airing of reality TV shows are often a modified dominant cultural technology that serve ‘to insert first, a nationalist ideology, and second, a social philosophy, into a commercial [TV] formula’.  

In post-2000 China, TV culture is part of a new age that features self-innovation, media and digital convergence, transnational collaboration and transcultural appropriation. TV formats have further aided Chinese mass media’s ‘promotion of a market economy, consumerism, and the nationalistic project of building a “strong and powerful” China, while continuing to serve as a site of discursive contestation’. In particular, the extensive economic productivity and cultural adaptability of formats allow adapted programmes to easily ‘accommodate the specific social characteristics of Chinese society’. The Chinese entertainment TV industry has experienced several waves of format adaptation and innovation. Certain previous scholarship, such as the one by Fung, believes that the advent and popularity of TV formats in post-socialist, neoliberal China evidence that ‘television nowadays is not too much different from the propaganda of the old days. It is still a state apparatus’. However, this kind of understanding misses the nuances and complexities that have proliferated on the screen of 21st-century Chinese formatted TV. One specific aspect that remains significantly underexplored and underemphasised, if not intentionally ignored, in the existing body of literature on Chinese TV is the unexpected yet phenomenal surge in

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19 Ruoyun Bai and Geng Song, ‘Introduction’ to Chinese Television in the Twenty-First Century: Entertaining the Nation (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 3-4. Also, see Fung, ‘Globalizing Televised Culture’, p. 187. I use the terms ‘the West’ and ‘Western’ in this thesis to denote and interrogate Euro-American-centred cultures, practices and forces on which the binary of the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ is based. Rather than reinforcing the cultural binarism and hierarchy embedded in an essentialist use of the terms, I recognise the historical and contextual contestability of the concepts involved in this binarism. Taking a postcolonial, deconstructive stance, I use the terms to emphasise the ‘relationally opposed and mutually defining’ features of the notions of ‘the East’ and ‘the West’. For detailed discussions on this point, see Peter A. Jackson, ‘Mapping Poststructuralism’s Borders: The Case for Poststructuralist Area Studies’, Sojourn 18:1 (2003), p. 54.


21 Bai, Staging Corruption; Bai and Song, eds., Chinese Television in the Twenty-First Century: Entertaining the Nation (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Haiqing Yu, Media and Cultural Transformation in China (New York: Routledge, 2009).


24 Ibid., p. 186.
popularity of non-conforming gendered (and sometimes also sexualised) images. These images have often been manufactured, proliferated and celebrated in globally formatted variety TV produced by provincial stations within what remains a largely heteronormative, patriarchal sociocultural reality. They include, though are not limited to, transgender celebrities, cross-dressing performances, and portrayals and connotations of same-sex intimacy.25

The wide circulation and celebration of these gender- and sexual-nonnormative images on Chinese TV would not have been possible without the rise of TV format glocalisation in China. As I further discuss in subsequent sections of this introduction, the concept of ‘glocalisation’ highlights what Roland Robertson identifies as ‘the simultaneity and the inter-penetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local, or—in a more general vein—the universal and the particular’.26 The concept has been widely used in contemporary scholarly theorisation of global TV cultures. In a manner similar to the importation and adaptation of foreign TV formats, Chinese-speaking societies’ cultural appropriation and translation of the English word ‘queer’, as well as its related, Western-originated pop cultures and academic and scientific knowledge, can also be understood as a recent glocalist phenomenon. Yet, rather than reinforcing the essentialism of sociocultural identity formations and their concomitant norms, my analysis emphasises the disruptive, performative, pejorative and fluid characteristics of queer forms of ‘doing and becoming’ that, in Andrea Bachner’s words, preclude ‘any conceptual stability or stasis’ and stand ‘in opposition to the very notions of dualism, clear-cut boundaries, and categorical purity’.27 In so

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26 Robertson, ‘Globalisation or Glocalisation?’, p. 196.

doing, I develop a ‘queer-glocalisation’ framework to doubly debunk the static polarity prevalent in global queer and global TV studies. It moves beyond a binary understanding of global TV formats—the transcultural traffic and flows of a particular form of cultural products of globalisation—as either ‘original’ creations or ‘imitative’ acts. Instead, my theoretical approach works to delineate the complex ways in which multiple forces and factors associated with the ideologies and power struggles of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality and class, at both global and local levels, are intertwined, mutually defining and co-constitutive in this process. Furthermore, I consider how this non-binary lens helps to incorporate, constitute and revise the understandings and function of the ‘national’ as an articulation of cultural identities and imaginaries. In the Chinese-speaking world, the meaning of ‘queer’ (a term that originated from a Euro-American context) has been transculturally rendered, altered and appropriated to connote or denote a parodic (if not antagonistic) attitude towards China’s Communist and nationalist imaginaries. This politically loaded, if not explicitly defiant, ‘glocal’ feature of queerness in China also demonstrates the usefulness of the ‘glocalisation’ framework for interrogating the alliance of queerness and TV formats in negotiations with Chinese mainstream, normative cultures.

To achieve this goal, this thesis presents an in-depth critical analysis of China’s glocalisation of TV concepts and formulas in three often queerly connotated variety genres: talk shows (tuokou xiù), reality TV (zhenren xiù) and impersonation shows (muofang xiù). The three genres were all originally imported or revised from non-Mainland Chinese cultures. In recent years, these genres have often presented images of transsexual and/or transgender women and queer moments and performances involving cis females. 28 Using

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28 I use ‘transsexual’ (abbreviated as ‘trans’ in further discussions in Chapter Two) in this thesis to refer to people who have undergone gender-reassignment surgeries or who have practised forms of ‘sex-alteration’. I use the word ‘transgender’ as an umbrella term to denote ‘all cross-gender identifying subjects’. Nevertheless, I do acknowledge that these uses, though prevalent in some Chinese-speaking contexts, might unintentionally blur ‘the difference between diverse forms of embodiments and presentations’. For detailed discussions on this point, see Helen Hok-Sze Leung, ‘Trans on Screen’, in Howard Chiang (ed.), Transgender China (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 186; and Howard Chiang, ‘Imagining Transgender China’, in Howard Chiang (ed.), Transgender China (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 3-19.
specific case studies from each genre, I investigate why and how certain formatted programmes have become a queer ‘runway’ where norm-defying female images and celebrity personas thrive within and survive from the mainstream media space’s gender and sexual policing, so to speak, yet sometimes also a worrying and ambivalent one. The paradoxes and promises of contemporary Chinese lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) culture in its conversations and contestations with local normative ideologies and global flows of TV and queer knowledge are also interrogated. By so doing, I do not aim at a clear-cut claim about whether TV formats, or global TV flows in general, help to liberalise or further subordinate gender and sexual minorities in post-2000 Chinese society. Rather, my exploration constructs a comprehensive thesis for understanding the ways in which queer meanings emerge, reside in, contribute to and flow through predominantly heteronormative, patriarchal public culture and mainstream spaces.

In other words, this thesis presents a concerted study of China’s TV as a mass medium (targeting a wide range of audiences with diverse gender, sexual and sociocultural interests) and its gender- and sexuality-related negotiations. Rather than ambitiously establishing new region-specific conceptual frameworks to theorise Chinese or Asian gender and sexual cultures in general, my project presents a contradictory scenario in which queer signs, performances, identities and desires that were assumed to be banned in China’s mainstream media industry are publicised and celebrated in the TV sector of this (Western-defined) authoritarian, hetero-patriarchal society. The televisual scenes depicted and analysed in this thesis do not bolster a cursory view of post-2000 China as becoming more liberal, LGBTQ-welcoming and less heteronormative. Drawing on existing scholarship on media and cultural glocalisation, I term the ‘doubleness’ or entangled co-existence of queer and normative tendencies in contemporary Chinese formatted TV culture ‘the duality of queer glocalisation’. This queer-glocal duality ultimately demonstrates that Chinese queer media studies can move away from a Western-centric model without denying the practicality and relevance of Western concepts, theories and methodologies, especially in an age of globalisation when different sectors of societies all over the world are
becoming more and more interrelated. Although a similar doubleness has been uncovered and carefully discussed in previous studies of post-feminist media and Hollywood cinema, the three TV genres and their related formats investigated in this research reveal diverse ways of understanding how ‘the duality of queer glocalisation’ enables the local TV culture and its related digital technologies and platforms in a largely hetero-patriarchal nation-state to actively negotiate a wide spectrum of unsanctioned gender positions, sexual desires and contesting sociocultural anxieties, which are intricately linked to the larger global scene in the new millennium. I elaborate on this point in the sixth section of this introduction, where I briefly discuss the content of the individual chapters included in the thesis.

Employing methodologies primarily taken from social scientific research, this study uses an innovative queer media studies lens to connect the Chinese televisualisation of female gender and sexuality with global TV culture. Theoretically, my analysis draws on global TV studies, global queering theory, Chinese gender studies and feminist theories, and media and cultural globalisation research. Although some concepts and theories discussed and employed in this project are drawn from Euro-American-based studies of TV, gender and sexual cultures, my project by no means encourages local essentialism or advocates ‘Western imperialism’ in Asian studies. Rather, my conceptual discussion acknowledges an ongoing tension between ‘antiuniversalism’ and ‘antiessentialism’ in the study of Asian media, gender and sexuality. Due to the scope of this project, which is limited to contemporary Chinese formatted TV programmes, I do not claim to offer a solution to this debate. However, it should be emphasised that rather than using specific Chinese TV programmes as case studies to test Anglophone scholarship and its evaluative standards in queer and media studies, my

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research recognises the usefulness of the critical logics and deconstructive power of some Euro-American academic dialogues for understanding contemporary Chinese queer TV phenomena. Over the past two decades, there has been a rising trend in Asian studies and inter-Asian cultural studies to critically questions the value of Eurocentric theories and approaches.\(^{32}\) For instance, in his monograph *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialisation*, Kuan-hsing Chen emphasises the mutual shaping and interconnectedness of geoculturally proximate Asian histories, political-economies and societies.\(^{33}\) Rather than adopting this radical ‘re-centring Asia as subject’ approach, my thesis examines the importation, appropriation, synthesisation and popularisation of certain formats (and genres) throughout the history of Chinese TV, while paying special attention to how they are glocalised in the mass media and popular cultural domains of contemporary China to mediate gender and sexual (non)normativities. On the one hand, I reveal the mechanisms underlying contemporary Chinese TV industry’s titillating use of and capitalising on queer images and performances in formatted variety shows. On the other hand, my readings of the shows unveil the queer subjectivities and strategic responses of the producers, performers, celebrities and audiences in the context of persistent, state-promoted, heteronormative and patriarchal pressure on women. Ultimately, this thesis illustrates that this contemporary queer TV culture has been enacted by and is continually negotiating with *both* the dominant industrial, technological and social-political forces of mainstream Chinese society and the nonnormatively gendered and sexualised desires and tactics of TV professionals, performers and audiences.

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I first present an overview of key terms and relevant theories from interrelated studies on TV formats and queer cultures in both Western and Chinese-speaking contexts. Following my


review of the scholarship, I map out my research methodologies and questions. Moreover, linking this queer TV culture to the ‘queer sensationalist’ phenomena I have theorised from other sectors of Chinese entertainment and celebrity industries, such as China’s music stardom and fandom, I point out that this queer-natured pop culture can be seen as a widely emerging cultural trend in post-2010 Chinese mainstream media and pop cultural discourses. In line with Raymond Williams’s conceptualisation of culture as ‘dominant’, ‘residual’ and/or ‘emergent’, I further underline the queer promise and peril of contemporary Chinese TV and public cultures rooted in this country’s gendered history and contemporary reconfigurations and circulations of queer symbols, connotations and messages. These queer dynamics of Chinese media and pop culture across spatial-temporal frames are further unpacked in the next chapter (Chapter One). In the last part of this introduction, I outline the structure of the thesis.

2. Redefining ‘format’

Since this research centres on TV formats in China, it is useful to first discuss the definition of ‘format’ in global TV studies. The first scholarly book on TV format, *Copycat Television: Globalisation, Program Formats, and Cultural Identity* was written by Australia-based media scholar Albert Moran in 1998. Since then, global TV formats and adaptations have become contentious cultural resources for media scholars in examining the roles of regionalism, nationalism, and individual and collective sociocultural identities in the process of media and cultural globalisation.

As the first scholar who clearly defined the term ‘TV format’, Moran understood it as ‘a set of invariable elements in a serial programme out of

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which the variable elements of individual episodes are produced’. Later, in an anthology coedited with Chinese TV scholar Michael Keane that was specifically devoted to Asian reconfigurations of global TV formats, Moran further emphasised that rather than a singular, rigidly categorised technique in the TV industry, format ‘is a loose term that’ takes many forms and ‘covers a range of items that may be included in a format licensing agreement’. In other words, a TV format should be seen as ‘an economic and cultural technology of exchange that has meaning not because of a principle but because of a function or effect’.

Moran’s definition of TV format is particularly relevant to this research. My use of the terms ‘format’ and ‘formatting’ draws on this ‘loosened’ conceptualisation to highlight the transcultural, creative appropriation and synthesis of televisual styles, narratives, symbols, values and aesthetics that are closely associated with certain genres and types of TV programmes. Furthermore, as Moran remarks, ‘the subject of programme formats and their national adaptation’ is ‘the point where the global meets the local’. My research takes Moran’s cue as a point of departure for investigating the ways in which global and local knowledge of queerness and TV format converges, contests and sometimes also merges with each other during the process.

It is worth noting that earlier scholarship on TV formats mostly situates its discussions within a transnational media business system. It often assumes that there are both a copyrighted original format (mostly derived from the West) and its licensed variations (those with officially purchased copyright and legal agreements) in other parts of the world. For instance, as Moran

39 Ibid., p. 6.
40 Ibid., p. 5.
explained, global TV “‘formats’ are a relatively recent development in the international television industry that has led to both a formalisation and a regulation of the movement of program ideas from one place to another’.\textsuperscript{42} In a similar vein, in his 2004 article, ‘McTV’, Silvio Waisbord compared global TV formatting with the global business model of McDonald’s.\textsuperscript{43} In so doing, Waisbord illustrated that formats ‘are designed to “travel well” across national boundaries’ because they only ‘carry meanings that are not necessarily attached to national cultures’ and thus are more adaptable to various domestic markets.\textsuperscript{44} According to Waisbord, formats ‘reveal the dynamics of “glocalisation”’ which facilitates the local creative appropriation of rationalised global media and cultural formulas to produce content with local particularities.\textsuperscript{45} Through these means, formats help ‘maximise profits [during the globalisation and capitalisation of a country and its TV sector] while “the national” continues to articulate cultural identities’.\textsuperscript{46}

This body of literature framed TV formats as ‘intellectual property’ within an idealised global business regime. It remains valuable and productive for unravelling the economic and political potential and problems of TV adaptation and flows, as well as for theorising ways to minimise production risk for local media industries and regulate transnational media copyright issues. However, this kind of scholarly understanding has been problematised by more recent scholarship for its narrow context of analysis and dichotomisation of the global and the local.

Notably, an anthology published in 2012, \textit{Global Television Formats: Understanding Television Across Borders}, presents a number of case studies from the global TV industry in the second decade of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. In the introduction, coeditors Tasha Oren and Sharon Sharaf criticise the simplistic view of format as ‘a globally distributed container for locally produced

\textsuperscript{42} Moran, \textit{Copycat Television}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 368.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
content’. They call for a decentring of Western-focused TV studies (or the media imperialism theory) by exploring the sociocultural significance, complexities and functions of global TV adaptations in diverse local (mostly non-Western) scenarios. As the coeditors contend, global TV formats and adaptation processes showcase ‘the core paradox of globalization’s relation to intense “localization” and the tension between homogenization and difference involved in economic and cultural globalization processes’. Meanwhile, they argue that local audiences’ responses to these formatted programmes also epitomise ‘tensions among local, regional, national and global identities [that] are articulated and experienced in new, inter-mediated ways’.

In addition, as the case studies in the anthology demonstrate, the distinctions between the original format and its adaptations, as well as the categorisations of TV texts, genres and formats, have become more and more blurry and fluid in recent years. Concurring with and expanding Moran’s earlier understanding of format as ‘a loose term’, these studies further showcase the fact that global TV formats are ‘embedded … in local and global industrial, economical, textual, cultural and regulatory practices and constraints’ and thus should be studied both within and beyond ‘industrial’ and ‘legal’ discourses.

More specifically, in his chapter in the anthology, Vinicius Navarro finds that in the ‘standard’ definition, ‘formats are … expected to function as intellectual property, so that they can circulate easily but not freely’. However, using the case study of dance competition programmes adapted for the Brazilian market, Navarro questions this rigid definition. First, as he explains, some local adaptations not only borrow features from diverse TV formats and genres but also learn from the successful cases of other local

47 Oren and Shahaf, ‘Television Formats’, p. 3.  
48 Ibid.  
49 Ibid., p. 4.  
50 Ibid.  
51 Ibid., p. 4.  
variations of the same original format.\(^{53}\) As a result, TV adaptations, similar to film adaptations, ‘are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin’.\(^{54}\) Eventually, local TV adaptations not only have the cultural traits of their so-called ‘original’ framework but also contain contextual characteristics of the local public culture, other local TV programmes, and the franchise’s adaptations in other local areas. These endless processes of adaptation and reinvention can generate formatted shows that simultaneously feature reproduction and innovation.\(^{55}\) In other words, local TV adaptation is always a highly creative, performative, volatile process that combines existing stylistic elements, contextual specificities and newly invented televisual components.

Furthermore, Navarro points out the importance of considering the complex discourses involving the unlicensed, or illegal, cloning of certain formats in global TV adaptation studies because ‘the copies’, whether legal or illegal, might change and fuse with ‘the original[s]’.\(^{56}\) A few other studies in the anthology echo this point. For instance, based on Waisbord’s understanding of formats and Jason Mittell’s definition of TV genres as ‘historically situated cultural products constituted by media practices and subject to ongoing change and redefinition’,\(^{57}\) Yeidy M. Rivero looks at Cuban sitcoms that have partially been shaped by the global flows of American sitcoms. In so doing, Rivero uncovers the potential of global TV studies to extend ‘the categorisation of format to be inclusive of the travels and the industrial, thematic, and cultural adaptations of television genres’\(^{58}\).

\(^{53}\) Ibid., pp. 23-38.
\(^{55}\) Navarro, ‘More than Copycat Television’, p. 31.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 27.
\(^{57}\) Jason Mittell, Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 3.
Similarly, in the 2007 monograph *New Television, Globalisation, and the East Asian Cultural Imagination*, coauthors Michael Keane, Anthony Y. H. Fung and Albert Moran concur with these ways of redefining and broadening global TV format studies. They coin the term ‘East Asian cultural imaginations’ to explain the revival of regionalism, the innovation, and the sometimes ‘unofficial’ duplication (rather than copyright-violating plagiarism) of globally circulated TV formats in East Asia. As they find, this complex process involves ‘the refashioning of ideas into new versions, spin-offs and ancillary products’.\(^{59}\) It facilitates much more intricate power relationships and hierarchies even within local communities, such as cultural flows and infusions between and within East Asian countries.\(^{60}\)

Adopting the aforementioned, revised definition of ‘format’ in global TV studies, this thesis considers three recent, popular Chinese variety TV shows from the new millennium. Each show not only adapts global TV formats but also constantly appropriates, adjusts and revises elements from particular popular programmes of the relevant genres. In so doing, these three shows and their associated genres that are introduced and analysed in Chapters Two, Three and Four of this thesis showcase dissimilar ways of mediating queer (and sometimes also feminist), yet not necessarily anti-hegemonic or oppositional, meanings during the clashes, amalgamation and mutual transformation of local, transcultural and global cultures. As my critical analyses in the three case-study chapters illustrate, it is useful to consider an analytical concept of ‘queer glocalisation’ in describing the shows’ format appropriative and adaptive processes.

### 3. Queer glocalisation in contemporary China

#### 3.1. TV glocalisation as a dual process

It is worthwhile explaining that my use of the words ‘glocalise’, ‘glocalising’ and ‘glocalisation’ in this thesis are different from Michael Keane’s understanding of the formatting process in the Chinese TV industry. As

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Keane believes, the Chinese adaptation of global TV formats ‘makes the
global programming fit the local’. 61 Take a different perspective, my
theorisation and analysis draw on Robertson’s influential theory of
‘glocalisation’. By so doing, I challenge the rigid binarisms that characterise
attempts to understand the formation of ‘globalist’ 62 cultures and identities,
such as the ‘local’ and the ‘global’, and ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’. The
glocalisation theory is useful in identifying and unpacking ‘the “mutually
implicative” relationships’ between these categorical oppositions, and thus
helps to ‘examine their complex interplays’. 63 As I further explicate in this
section, the adaptation and production of formatted shows in China raise
questions regarding a more complicated, subtle glocalist televiusal discourse
that has been motivated by and also actively mobilising the dual,
discriminatory processes of glocalisation.

The concept of ‘glocal’ is a portmanteau derived from a marketing strategy,
known as ‘global localisation’ in Japanese business circles in the 1980s. 64 In
1994, Robertson broadened the term ‘glocal’ to describe the context-specific
practices and the interdependent, mutually shaping relationship between the
local and the global during ongoing local adaptations and revisions of global
cultures. 65 As he explains, ‘the projects of glocalization [are] the constitutive
features of contemporary globalization’. 66 Following Robertson’s
understanding, some Asian media and pop culture scholars have discussed
how glocalisation emerges in global information flows as a ‘dual’ process.

61 Michael Keane, ‘It’s All in a Game: Television Formats in the People’s Republic of
China’, in Koichi Iwabuchi, Stephen Muecke and Mandy Thomas (eds.), Trans-Asian
Cultural Traffic (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), p. 61.
62 Here I use the term, ‘globalist’, to emphasises both the subjectivities and dominant
ideologies emerging from specific social-historical contexts of globalisation. For a detailed
discussion on the differences between globalism and globalisation, see Paul James,
63 Richard Giulianotti and Roland Robertson, ‘Glocalization and Sport in Asia: Diverse
64 Ahmad Seyf, ‘Can Globalisation and Global Localisation Explain Foreign Direct
Investment? Japanese Firms in Europe’, International Journal of the Economics of
65 Roland Robertson, ‘Globalization or glocalization?’ Journal of International
Communication 1:1 (1994), pp. 33-52. Also see Roland Robertson, ‘Glocalization: Time-
Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity’, in Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland
For instance, using Asian sport as a case study, Richard Giulianotti and Roland Robertson’s 2012 research further conceptualise the ‘duality of glocality’. This term describes the ‘coexistent and mutually dependent social’ processes advanced in glocalisation. One is ‘the global spread and normalization of distinctive identities’, which is also known as the ‘universalization of particularism’. The other is the ‘idea of the universal being given global-human concreteness’, which is also termed as the ‘particularization of universalism’.

In a more concrete manner, East Asian TV scholar Koichi Iwabuchi theorises the history and dual process of glocalising Japanese TV formats in other East Asian countries. In his account, what happens in the course of the adaptation of a global TV format is ‘the pleasure of feeling [both] same and dissimilar’ while sustaining ‘the ubiquity of [a] globally institutionalized unevenness and exclusion in each locality’.

As Iwabuchi elaborates,

[W]hat is being promoted is not simply ‘global localization’ that aims to adopt the common to the difference but also ‘local globalization’ that makes audiences feel ‘glocal’, that is, a sense of participation in a global society through the reciprocated enjoyable recognition of local (in most cases, synonymous to ‘national’) specificities articulated through the shared formats.

... The glocal fiesta excludes the incommensurable differences of cultural others (e.g. immigrants, refugees) that cannot be pleasurably consumed or easily formatted. Such unmarketable differences are considered as dangerous, something to be expelled from the ‘We’-realm.
Iwabuchi’s view recognises and highlights the vibrant yet hierarchical nature of the duality of glocality. As he points out, this glocalist process is characterised by multi-levelled cultural normalisation and marginalisation.

Moreover, this form of duality does not exist only in media and cultural glocalisation but can be found in other forms of sociocultural evolution, progression and formation. For example, feminist media scholar Angela McRobbie also discusses a similar process of ‘double entanglement’ in her study of the feminist and backlash ideas merged in contemporary Western post-feminist pop culture.\textsuperscript{75} As she elaborates,

post-feminist can be explored through what I would describe as a ‘double entanglement’. This comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life …, with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations.\textsuperscript{76}

My employment of ‘glocal’ in this research is built on these productive ways of analysing global cultural flows in Asia and postfeminist cultures in the West. I understand the glocalisation of TV formats in contemporary China as a process of ‘double entanglement’,\textsuperscript{77} in which ‘cultural borrowing, appropriation, hybridization and indigenization are common practices’.\textsuperscript{78} Through these discursive practices, China has not only established close conversations with the global economy and culture (in the course of the particularisation of universalism or global localisation), but also self-represented and -imagined as a civilised, economically and politically powerful nation that takes a central role on the global stage (in the course of the universalisation of particularism or local globalisation).

Additionally, inspired by Iwabuchi’s view of the local and national features of global TV formats, my research concentrates on provincial station-produced formatted variety TV programmes. By so doing, I interrogate whether and how ‘national’ specificities are incorporated and negotiated in

\textsuperscript{75} McRobbie, ‘Post-Feminism and Popular Culture’, pp. 255-264.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Iwabuchi, ‘Feeling Glocal’, p. 28.
the dual processes of local/provincial TV productions. Diverging from Iwabuchi’s understanding of the local as ‘synonymous to [the] “national”’ in TV format flows and appropriation, I deem ‘the national’ as forms of the Communist Chinese party-state’s ideological and political projects, sociocultural and moral values, and mainstream media and official regulations that are believed to closely associate with China as an imagined nation-state. I pay particular attention to the provincial ‘variations’ of these ‘national’ characteristics embedded in formatted TV programmes. In turn, I emphasise that it is the local mutations and mediations of these national cultures in various TV industrial and cultural sectors, such as TV censorship/self-censorship and local TV broadcasters’ strategic goals, that open up ambivalent spaces for on-screen queer representations and expressions. This point will be further illustrated in my background review of China’s TV culture in Chapter One.

Furthermore, my analysis in this thesis highlights the idea that this dual, hierarchical process of televisual glocalisation in post-2000 China has been achieved through unobtrusive, discursive, ‘soft’ practices and technologies. On the one hand, this glocalisation of TV formats serves to legitimise socially, politically and economically desirable aspects and imaginings of the local or the national. On the other hand, it works to marginalise and silence groups, identities and cultures that do not necessarily contribute to China’s national projects of globalisation and modernisation. My exploration delves into this specific glocalist cultural phenomena. I go a step further to explore how queer meanings that are often symbolically linked with gender and sexual minorities (and are thus often less favoured, if not heavily discriminated against and stigmatised, by mainstream Chinese media and public cultures) have emerged from and are paradoxically celebrated in this TV glocalising process. I argue that the concurrent glocalisation of global queer and TV cultures in Chinese media and public spaces offers an effective vehicle for delivering and amplifying nonnormative knowledge, images and desires that have long been rooted in local Chinese culture, yet were scattered, shackled, distorted, trivialised or overshadowed in traditional TV genres. Therefore, to further make sense of the framework of ‘queer glocalisation’, in the following
subsection, I specify my use of ‘queer’/‘queerness’ in this study and explicate how and why *queer* can be seen as a form of glocalist phenomena in modern and contemporary Chinese-speaking societies.

### 3.2. The glocalisation of ‘queer’ in China

As briefly mentioned above, my analytical approach refuses to see queer/queerness as a form of minoritarian (or restrictive) identity category, while acknowledging that its meaning, related activism and theories have an Anglophone root. My use thereof develops the prevalent understandings of ‘queer’ in Euro-American media and cultural studies and underscores its fluid and performative characteristics in Chinese-speaking contexts.79

As noted by Jodie Taylor, the origin and historical development of the term, ‘queer’, in the Anglophone context ‘poetically evok[e] the ambiguity queerness has come to signify in modern times’.80 For example, according to *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word ‘queer’ has a ‘doubtful origin’ and might have amalgamated Indo-European, German, Latin and English cultures.81 One of the most influential scholarly definitions of *queer* in Anglophone queer theory is from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In her 1993 monograph *Tendencies*, Sedgwick describes *queer* as ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically’.82 Meanwhile, in another monograph published in 1993, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, queer media scholar Alexander Doty also extends the uses of queer and queer theory in his study of the nontraditional ‘positions, pleasures, and readings of’ the media audience.83 Moreover, following Sedgwick’s view, Cuban American scholar José Esteban Muñoz argues in his

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81 Ibid.
1999 monograph, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, that ‘to perform queerness is to constantly disidentify, to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly “line up”’. This line of Western queer literature and visual cultural studies understands queer as ‘a political or ethical approach, an aesthetic quality, a mode of interpretation or way of seeing, a perspective or orientation, or a way of desiring, identifying or disidentifying’. It builds a fecund ground for contemporary queer media and pop culture studies.

As noticed by Bachner, the application of Western queer theory to Chinese-speaking cultures is often believed to risk becoming a weapon in reiteration of the West’s global hegemony, … underpin the illusion of a unilateral dissemination of ‘theoretical’ knowledge from the West to the rest, … [or remain] token of a missionary libertarianism that brings the light of queer freedom to cultures framed as sexually repressed.

However, as Judith Butler articulates, rather than a stable marker of cultural identity or origin, ‘queer’ represents ‘a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings’. Concurring with Butler’s understanding, Bachner further argues that in order to see the full potential of ‘queer’ in challenging any conceptual rigidity, scholars should ‘read [this term] less as the description of a state’, more ‘as a practice of “queering”’. As Bachner explains in detail,

The term ‘queer’ [in the U.S.] has undergone a more radical process of resignification, from a discriminatory slur targeting alternative sexual expressions and desires as ‘strange’, ‘twisted’, or ‘against nature’, to a positive term of self-definition. Precisely because ‘queer’ defines itself as exceeding clear-cut boundaries and definitions, it also lays claim to other conceptual and real spaces. Not only is ‘queer’ now increasingly being wielded, at times indiscriminately, as a marker of valued difference, heterogeneity, and hybridity, the concept and term has also been exported from its U.S. source to many other cultural settings.

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86 Bachner, ‘Queer Affiliations’, p. 201.


89 Ibid., p. 203.
Indeed, research on Chinese-speaking LGBT and queer media cultures has highlighted the linguistic travelling and mutations of the English word ‘queer’. As revealed in a number of studies, its cultural translations in Chinese-speaking contexts demonstrate a complex transgression and reconfiguration of geopolitical boundaries and specificities. This process in fact can also be understood as an excellent example of cultural glocalisation.

For instance, film scholar Song Hwee Lim notes that ‘[s]ince the mid-1990s, the term ““queer” has also become popular in Taiwan, where it is translated as ku’er (literally “cool kid”) or guaitai (meaning weirdo, or literally “strange fetus”).’ As recorded by Chinese queer culture scholar Hongwei Bao, following the growing popularity of the use of ku’er in 1990s Taiwan, a Chinese literary scholar first rendered the English academic concept of ‘queer theory’ as ‘guaiyi lilun’ (literally ‘strange theory’) and introduced it to Mainland China as a part of ‘Western literary theory’ in 2000. Yet, the person who eventually familiarised Mainland Chinese people with the glocalised word ku’er was the Chinese sociologist Yinhe Li.

Li’s 2002 translation of a series of academic works produced by Western queer and feminist scholars, titled *Ku’er Lilun (Queer Theory)*, is believed to have signaled ‘the official introduction of the term queer to mainland China’. As noted by Bao, Li’s adoption of queer in the book ‘is devoid of the stigmatized history of the term “queer” in the Western context and instead takes on a celebratory tone signifying rebellious youth and alternative lifestyles’. My approach adopts a similar queer optic to underline the cosmopolitan, capitalist, glocalist characteristics of nonnormatively gendered

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92 Ibid., p. 80.


94 Bao, *Queer Comrades*, p. 80.
and eroticised televisual images. Yet, it does not follow a triumphant view of emerging queer pop culture in China. My examination is neither dismissive of queer’s Western cultural and political references. Instead, drawing on McRobbie’s theory of ‘double entanglement’ discussed in the previous section, my queer critique delineates the diverse ways in which contemporary mainstream Chinese entertainment simultaneously cashes in on yet also detaches itself from stigmatised LGBTQ identity politics and social movements.

A growing body of scholarship has been dedicated to differentiating the appropriated meanings of queer and homosexuality in Chinese-speaking contexts. For example, S. H. Lim uses ‘queer’ in his research mostly to denote its ‘temporal-political-activist’ and ‘institutional-disciplinary-theoretical’ senses. In contrast, he delineates a unique ‘translingual practice’ in modern Chinese-speaking discourses on homosexuality. S. H. Lim’s explanation builds on other historians’ work on the intercultural, mostly Western, influences on the homosexual discourses in pre-modern (before 1912) and Republican China (1912–1949). As he describes,

Up until the 1990s, tongxinglian and tongxing’ai remained the most commonly used Chinese discursive terms for homosexuality. This began to change with the appropriation of the term tongzhi (literally ‘same will’), the Chinese translation of the Soviet communist term ‘comrade’, as a discursive term for same-sex sexuality. … The term tongzhi was first publicly appropriated for same-sex sexuality by the organizers of Hong Kong’s inaugural lesbian and gay film festival in 1989 and introduced to Taiwan in 1992 when the Taipei Golden Horse International Film Festival featured a section on lesbian and gay films. It has since gained popular currency in Taiwan, Hong Kong, overseas Chinese communities, and on the World Wide Web, where it is widely used to refer to lesbian- and gay-related activities and publications…. Even in China, where there is potential ambiguity and confusion in its use resulting from the conflation of its appropriated meaning with its

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95 Ibid, pp. 255-256.
96 Lim, Celluloid Comrades, p. 12.
97 Ibid., p. 10. Also see Lydia H. Liu, Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture and Translated Modernity: China 1900-1937 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).
political reference, the term is increasingly used to refer to same-sex sexuality.99 [emphasis in original]

Using Hong Kong scholar Wah-Shan Chou’s words, S. H. Lim further explicates that the popular use of tongzhi is because of ‘its positive cultural references, gender neutrality, desexualisation of the stigma of homosexuality, politics beyond the homo-hetero duality, and use as an indigenous cultural identity for integrating the sexual into the social’.100 According to S. H. Lim, the term tongzhi (meaning ‘comrade’) helps ‘acknowledge the temporal coevality (the 1990s) of its circulation with the emergence of representations of male homosexuality in cinemas from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong’.101 As he remarks, this simultaneous emergence, convergence and cross-geographical circulation of visual and linguistic languages devoted to ‘marginal elements and identities’ indicates that a new discursive language can use cinema as a vehicle to transcend national boundaries and, in the process, act as a catalyst for new identity categories and new forms of solidarity. While this coevality can be seen as a consequence of the term providing a timely discursive language for the films, it can also be argued that, on the contrary, these films have created a platform for the extensive use of the new discursive language, thus highlighting the enabling potential and constitutive aspect of cinema.102

My analysis in this study does not primarily concentrate on the linguistic and transliterary aspects of LGBTQ cultures in Chinese-speaking societies. Also, I use ‘queer’, rather than tongzhi or other glocalised words for homosexual identities (such as ‘lala’, a glocalised term denoting lesbians), in order to tease out the contentious relationships between the emerging queer pop culture and politically sensitive, culturally stigmatised LGBT groups, identities and movements in China. Yet, my analytic logic is largely inspired by S. H. Lim’s theorisation of cinema as an effective medium and facilitator

99 Lim, Celluloid Comrades, p. 11.
100 Ibid., p. 12 and also see Chou, Tongzhi, p. 2.
101 Lim, Celluloid Comrades, p. 12.
102 Ibid. In their study of global queer cinemas, UK-based film scholars, Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt also propose to use queer as a verb and argue that ‘to propose a queer world cinema is to invite trouble. The combination of terms provokes a series of anxieties about the certainty of knowing and the privilege of position; it raises fears of mistranslation, of neocolonial domination, of homogeneity and the leveling of difference. It suggests the forcing of meaning or the instrumentalization of film aesthetics in support of a limiting identity politics’. See, Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, Queer Cinema in the World (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 4.
for the transcultural inception, shaping, connection and circulation of sexual minority cultures in Chinese and Sinophone communities in the 1990s. My examination focuses on a similar ‘temporary coevality’ of the rise of queer female images and the popularity of TV formats in post-2000 China. In turn, I view TV formats as productive carriers and catalysts for the proliferation, celebration and circulation of queer moments, sentiments and pleasure in mainstream media and public spaces. In line with S. H. Lim’s research on tongzhi/comrades cinema, I inspect how this queer TV and its related queer-fuelled pop cultural phenomena ‘have been constructed, spoken of, mobilized, by whom, for what purposes, to what audiences, and why’ (emphasis in original). By so doing, my analysis of the cultural-televisual features of the formatted programmes eventually uncovers ‘the [queer] enabling potential and constitutive aspect of’ post-2000 China’s TV glocalisation.

It is worth mentioning that similar to S. H. Lim’s account, Bao’s work on Chinese queer cinema traces the use of tongzhi in Mainland China to its socialist history. Bao underlines the transformed meaning of tongzhi in postsocialist China as a reference to contemporary Chinese cosmopolitan gay culture. Moreover, in his more recent study of tongzhi social movements and cultural productions, Bao further illustrates that tongzhi—‘as an identity category and as a form of activism’—connotes queer meanings. Meanwhile, Bao borrows Jacques Derrida’s term ‘catachresis’ (meaning ‘misuse of words’) to make sense of China’s indigenisation of the term ku’er (queer). Based on a number of Western critical theorists’ applications of ‘catachresis’, such as those in the work of Derrida and Gayatri Spivak, Bao sees ku’er as an analytical tool with great political potential in globalist,

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103 Ibid., p. 13.
104 Hongwei Bao, “‘Queer Comrades’: Transnational Popular Culture, Queer Sociality, and Socialist Legacy’, English Language Notes 49:1 (Spring/Summer 2011), pp. 131-137. However, in his later work, Bao revised his understanding of tongzhi as a word with ‘queer’ meanings, while deemed tongxinglian as the Chinese term referring to ‘homosexual or gay’. See, for example, Bao, ‘Queer as Catachresis’, p. 84.
105 Ibid., p. 135.
106 Bao, Queer Comrades, p. 4.
107 Bao, ‘Queer as Catachresis’, pp. 80-82.
postcolonial and postmodern contexts. As he explains, the term showcases ‘that words do not have original and fixed meanings; instead, meanings are constantly produced as words are used in different historical and social contexts’.  

Bao further applies this theory to his study of the Beijing Queer Film Festival’s translation and occasional misreading of the word *ku’er*. As he finds, the constantly revised translations of the English word *queer* ‘in situated cultural locations and at specific historical moments’ demystify the binarism of ‘global queer “originality” and Chinese queer “authenticity”’. In other words, the queer subjectivity embedded in the glocalised Chinese word, *ku’er*, works as a discursive intervention to the Western LGBTQ hegemony that believes queer cultures in the Western world is the ‘original’ version and modern LGBTQ cultures in other parts of the world are only imitative copies. This constructive, ongoing process of the local rendering of global knowledge makes ‘queer’ itself an open, productive technology for groups and cultures ‘living at the social margins’ to ‘negotiate and reconcile’ with normative social realities.  

Following Bao’s conceptualisation, other scholars have also demonstrated the productivity of applying the glocalised potential of ‘queer’ and queer theory to the examinations of contemporary China’s pop culture. For instance, as China studies scholars Elisabeth L. Engebretsen and William F. Schroeder point out,  

Ideas about sexual and gender nonnormativity that emerged under the rubric ‘queer theory’ were introduced in China at the turn of the new millennium. … [T]he term ‘queer’—and the paradigm of nonnormativity associated with this term—have been appropriated more and more widely in Chinese discourses and have helped shape emerging activist and academic work.  

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109 Bao, ‘Queer as Catachresis’, p. 80.
110 Ibid., p. 81.
111 Ibid., p. 87.
Furthermore, as Asian queer scholar Petrus Liu illustrates as regards the mutual shaping and constitution of the meanings of ‘queerness’ and ‘Chineseness’ in queer China studies,

The possibility of practicing queer theory in Chinese contexts demonstrates that critical attention to local knowledges and concerns does not immediately constitute a categorical rejection of ‘the queer’; rather it shows that what is ‘queer’ is constantly expanded, supplemented, and revised by what is ‘Chinese’.113

More specifically, dealing with this co-implicative relationship between ‘queerness’ and ‘Chineseness’, Sinophone media scholar Lily Wong examines the Hong Kong film industry’s queer construction of the ‘Chinese dream’ during the Cold War era.114 Using the Shaw Brothers’ female homoerotic movies as case studies, Wong demonstrates a multi-dimensionality of queerness in Chinese-speaking contexts that ‘connotes not only sexual identities on the margins of heteronormative conceptions, but also cultural identities straddling the edges of major discourses of nationhood or modernity’.115 This broadened perception of queer as not only a powerful research method but also a visual-cultural technique to contest, negotiate and deconstruct the constitutive limits of rigid, imperative, normative cultures and concepts is adopted and extended in this research. In the next subsection, I further explicate my innovative ‘queer-glocalist’ approach that draws on this ‘double’ use of queer. I illustrate that throughout this thesis, my ‘queer-glocalist’ optic helps theorise Chinese TV formatting as an exemplar of the duality of glocality.

### 3.3. Queer glocalisation and global queering theory

The aforementioned fruitful discussions on the glocality of queer theory and queer-related pop culture in China and the Sinophone world are also emblematic of the recent development, revision and application of de-Western-centric, decolonising ‘global queering’ studies in Asia.116 Originally

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115 Ibid., p. 90.
put forward by Australia-based scholar Dennis Altman in 1996, ‘global gay’/‘global queering’ theory aims to assess ‘the apparent internationalization of a certain form of social and cultural identity based upon homosexuality’. In other words, Altman believes that non-Western LGBTQ groups’ adoption of Western-style cultures points to the formation of a ‘global gay’ identity. This trend, according to Altman’s original theory, is an ‘expansion of an existing Western category’ resulted from cultural, media and sexual globalisation.

However, this earlier generation of global queering studies is problematic for its blatant universalisation and homogenisation of the modern public cultures of non-Western LGBTQ communities. It simplifies non-Western LGBTQ identities and politics as direct products of gender and sexual cultural flows from the West. The theory’s own cultural-imperialist logic has been challenged by a growing body of literature that either uncovers non-Western local queer traditions that precede cultural globalization or delimits contemporary queer cultural hybridity as emerging from the mutual transformation of global and local gender and sexual knowledges.

For example, as another Australia-based Southeast Asian gender studies scholar, Peter A. Jackson reveals, the highly commercialised information published in nationally distributed Thai print media from the 1960s to the 1980s, such as the images in popular magazines, has heavily shaped modern Thai lesbian, gay and transgender cultures. Moreover, the 2003 anthology, Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia, co-edited by Chris Berry, Fran Martin and Audrey Yue, also presents a series of groundbreaking work. The case studies in the anthology showcase the divergent ways in which a queer

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118 Ibid., p. 78.
Asia blossoming in an age of new media has been ‘indigenizing the global and producing mobile and contingent practices of self-inscription and self-identification’.\textsuperscript{121} In particular, a case study by Tom Boellstorff in the anthology deals with the queer dimension of Indonesian ‘dubbing’ of Western media.\textsuperscript{122} As Boellstorff shows, against the backdrop of the still largely heteronormative societies in contemporary Asia (whether this is for legal, historical, or religious reasons), the concurrent advent of new media technologies and LGBTQ cultures has brought about neither a simple borrowing of Western models of gender and sexual identifications nor a pure highlighting of local gender and sexual traditions and legacies.\textsuperscript{123} Instead, as Boellstorff demonstrates, the convergence of global and local minority cultures facilitated by the use of new media ‘questions the relationship between translation and belonging, asserting that the binarisms of import-export and authentic-inauthentic are insufficient to explain how globalizing mass media play a role in constituting subject-positions in Asia but do not determine them outright’.\textsuperscript{124}

Among flourishing global queering studies after 2000, Eng-Beng Lim’s theory of ‘glocalqueering’ deserves further discussion here.\textsuperscript{125} As an effort to problematise the Eurocentric-essentialist tone of the original ‘global queering’ framework, E. Lim’s study of Singaporean gay theatrical performances advocates an alternative ‘glocalqueering’ thesis. According to E. Lim’s explanation, this theory ‘works within the milieu of queer globalizations and diasporas while attending to the ways in which non-Western homoerotics are racialized by (auto)exotic and (neo)colonial epistemologies, ethnographies, histories, and different genres of queer performance’.\textsuperscript{126} Hence, a glocalqueering approach offers ‘alternative ways of conceptualizing

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., p. 43.
\textsuperscript{126} Lim, ‘Glocalqueering’, p. 387.
traditions, affiliations, kinship, genealogies and citizenship’. E. Lim delimits a form of ‘acting-gay’ pop culture. In this context-specific queer culture, E. Lim shows that ‘local artists, actors, activists, and gay boys on the street, together with censors, bureaucrats, and evangelicals, are all actively involved or invested in negotiating queer representations as they relate to the citizen-subject of Singapore’s political, cultural and social institutions’.

E. Lim’s thesis and case studies speak well to the gender and sexual imperialism in Altman’s ‘global gay’ imagination and are, to certain extent, illuminating and compelling. Yet, his theorisation is largely framed within diasporic and postcolonial sociocultural circumstances. His analysis pays most attention to the ‘performative visibility of a queer public … in a global city’. In contrast, the thesis would be less applicable to non-identity-based, if not entirely depoliticised, queer meanings and connotations that either deliberately or involuntarily emerge from the mainstream capitalist, heteronormative world of a nation-state, such as China which can only awkwardly be described as a ‘semi-feudal semi-colonial society’ in the early 20th century and is now a seemingly ‘neoliberal’ yet still largely dictatorial state.

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127 Ibid.
128 Ibid., 392.
130 Ibid., p. 104.
131 This term has been widely used to describe a specific historical period of China when its ‘feudal system was penetrated, but not superseded, by colonialism, thus giving rise to a hybrid social formation that had not been anticipated by classical historical materialism’. See, Jurgen Osterhammel, ‘Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire in Twentieth-Century China: Towards a Framework of Analysis’, in Wolfgang J. Mommsen (ed.), *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 296.
Although enlightened and sharing similarities with E. Lim’s approach of ‘glocalqueering’, my theoretical framework of ‘queer glocalisation’ diverges from the celebratory stance toward and an exclusive interest in the social-political power of LGBTQ media, pop culture, public spaces and activisms in a highly developed, neoliberal, postcolonial context. Rather, continuing the line of research that challenges the Eurocentrism of earlier ‘global gay’ scholarship, my approach dwells on and connects global TV and global queering studies to excavate the inherently entwined queer and glocal characteristics of contemporary Chinese TV as a mass medium. In turn, my study asks how the ‘duality of queer glocality’ prescribes and/or proscribes a norm-disruptive televisual dimension in the course of China’s adapting and revising of global TV cultures. I also interrogate whether the discursive practices of queer glocalisation in Chinese TV industry open up (or restrict, sacrifice or even eliminate) spaces for certain social-political-activist interventions to the heteronormative world of contemporary China.

This shifted emphasis of my ‘queer-glocalisation’ approach can be seen as a direct response to the call in more recent queer studies for challenging the essentialist use of queer as a shorthand for homosexual identities, cultures and communities. For instance, as Nikki Sullivan argues in the book *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, this problematic use of queer glosses over ‘differences of class, race, age, and so on’, regards ‘sexuality as a unified and unifying factor’. Sue Hendler and Michael Backs also find that this way to use queer ‘weakens the power of the term as a subversive descriptor’. Moreover, my research approach and emphasis also speak to the warning of current Euro-American queer TV studies against ‘seeing sexuality and sexuality only as representing queerness’. As Margo Miller has asserted about American TV, ‘[b]efore prime-time television had mainstreamed gay and lesbian characters, queer pleasures were widely

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available in sitcoms with same-sex intimacy and unconventionally gendered characters’.136 Meanwhile, as Jackson notes, ‘some Asian erotic identities are “pre-gay”, while others are “post-queer” in the sense that they exist outside Eurocentric understandings of sexual and gender difference’.137 My ‘queer-glocalist’ analytical approach focuses on a society where the Western-defined ‘mainstreaming’138 of gay and lesbian characters has never occurred. It is attentive to the queer spectacle crystallised in mainstream media culture’s appropriation of local, transcultural and global TV, gender and sexual knowledges, including institutionalised modern LGBTQ identities and identifications, associated stigmas, and media stereotypes and pop cultural signs (that might be visible in a certain cultural context, yet invisible or indecipherable in another). My approach, therefore, strives to reveal that the queer TV culture writ large today is a discursive result of refined, multi-dimensional playing with eroticised gendered performances, sentiments and embodiments. In a Eurocentric sense, this queer TV culture in contemporary China might seem ‘pre-gay’, ‘post-queer’ or ‘de-lesbianised’ (e.g., representations of gender-nonnormative women that are intentionally disassociated with contemporary, modernised lesbian identity, but explained as a form of female intimate bonding which has a deep root in modern Chinese history). Nevertheless, this ‘queer-glocalist’ phenomenon showcases how global knowledge and information is selectively appropriated and subjectively blended with local, transcultural and inter-Asian cultures in the fashioning of a Chinese commercial queer pop in mainstream media. It evades mainstream Chinese media censorship or crackdowns on politically-charged LGBTQ-focused cultures. In this vein, China’s queer TV demonstrates ‘Western eroticisms not as the model but as one set of historically specific forms beside many others’ (emphasis in original).139

further illustrate this point in the following section on research methodologies and questions.

4. A queer-glocalist analysis of Chinese TV

As discussed above, the disruptive power of the glocalised term, ‘queer’, in debunking naturalised notions and systems of gender, sexuality and nation-state shares common ground with the anti-static-polarity logic of media glocalisation. Therefore, both *queer* and *glocal* are particularly relevant to my study of nonnormative images of female gender and sexuality in contemporary Chinese formatted TV in an age of globalisation. Bringing together TV format glocalisation studies and global queering theories, I couple the two terms to form a ‘conjunctive’ conceptual framework.\footnote{140} This framework ‘attends to the multiple relationships in the infinite space opened up by the [conjunction], placed between two or more discursive formations’.\footnote{141}

As Sinophone scholar Shu-mei Shih points out, the ‘conjunctive’ relationship between theories and methodologies that are conceptually proximate can be ‘a non-prescriptive and richly generative operation’.\footnote{142} As Shih asserts, a conjunctive framework works to take on ‘a set of methodological procedures’ and ‘produce new combinations of meanings while deconstructing various centrisms along its many paths and directionalities’.\footnote{143} Following Shih’s view, I refer to the constant adaptation, appropriation, revision and hybridisation of global TV formats, which contribute to the formation, circulation and interpretation of queer meanings in cross-geocultural exchanges, as ‘queer glocalisation’. In this thesis, I apply the conjunctive framework of *queer glocalisation* to an interrogation of the state-backed, dominant cultural imagination of China as a heteronormative, modernised nation. By this means, I emphasise the combined energy of *queer* and *glocal* to form disruption, transgression and alternation to established meanings, logics and norms in the globalising and modernising discourses on both

\footnote{141}{Ibid.}
\footnote{142}{Ibid., p. 223.}
\footnote{143}{Ibid.}
gender and sexuality in China and on Chinese TV. I aim to show that the queer glocalisation of TV formats in China is a hierarchical, contradictory pop cultural discourse, rather than a form of politicised LGBTQ activism. On the one hand, it is driven by not only Chinese-specific industrial, political and sociocultural forces but also by the desire of the Chinese audience, producers and performers for queer production, queer pleasure and queer visibility. On the other hand, the consumers, producers and performers involved in the discourse, as well as the characters portrayed in the media texts, are not necessarily LGBTQ-identified, or explicitly tongzhi (comrade; homosexual) or ku’er (queer) people.

Methodologically, I employ a televisual discourse analysis in queer TV studies. This research method is inspired by queer media scholar Amy Villarejo’s queer archiving search and historicisation of American TV and Michel Foucault’s conceptualisation of discourse.144 In the introduction to the 2009 anthology, *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics*, the coeditors Glyn Davis and Gary Needham note that, queer TV studies should not be limited to evaluative research on what Ellis Hanson calls ‘moralistic politics of representation’145 on TV that assesses certain LGBTQ characters, portrayals or images are good or bad.146 Instead, by bridging queer and TV studies in mutually constructive, beneficial ways, the coeditors suggest to scrutinize ‘the complexity of [TV], and the ways in which it is designed, produced, distributed, and consumed in queer ways’.147 As one of the case studies in the anthology, Jaap Kooijman’s study of the American makeover TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo, USA, 2003-2007) demonstrates, if there is anything ‘queer’ about *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the queerness is to be found in the role of the straight male contestants rather than the openly gay stars of the show. Moreover, the show uses ‘queer’ as just another fashionable commodity, signifying good taste.

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147 Ibid., p. 3.
and a refined sense of style, thereby depoliticizing its critical potential.\textsuperscript{148}

This recognising and problematising of queerness on and about TV entertainment refuses to simplify queer TV culture as a capitalist exploitation and stereotyping of LGBTQ cultures on TV. A similar queer TV studies approach has been further elaborated by Villarejo in her 2004 monograph, \textit{Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire}.\textsuperscript{149} As she suggests, rather than searching for the ‘revolutionary or emancipatory’ social-political moments of LGBTQ groups in mainstream media, contemporary queer TV studies should challenge the dichotomy of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ representations that has dominated most Euro-American debates on LGBTQ pop cultures and identity politics.\textsuperscript{150} As she powerfully argues, TV itself is ‘an, if not \textit{the}, agent of forms of queer life’.\textsuperscript{151} She calls for a prolific ‘queer cultural studies approach to television’ that takes ‘a broad view of the tectonic \textit{movements} of enclosure—that is, media policy, regulative frameworks, and evolving forms of spectacle in the processes of neoliberalist expansion—in order to calibrate [queer TV scholars’] critical inventions’.\textsuperscript{152} In other words, queer TV study should explore ‘the appearance of queer marginalia’ by paying special attention to TV ‘histories, institutions, technology, and policy as the horizons and indeed preconditions for textual analysis or readings’.\textsuperscript{153}

For instance, as Villarejo’s innovative reading of American domestic dramas demonstrates, nonnormatively defined forms of life and televusal temporalities have been in symbiotic relationships and have mutually contributed to one another’s development.\textsuperscript{154} She notes that while ‘changing temporal orders on television [allow] new modes of queer representation’,

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{149} Villarejo, \textit{Ethereal Queer}.
\bibitem{150} Ibid., p. 3.
\bibitem{151} Ibid., p. 55.
\bibitem{153} Ibid., pp. 48-49.
\bibitem{154} Ibid., p. 15.
\end{thebibliography}
‘changing iterations of queerness lead to new televisual forms’. In this sense, TV, particularly as regards its continually evolving technological and industrial features, can be understood as queer in essence. Moreover, the urge to present, interpret and proliferate nonnormative genders and sexualities in a televisual space can also contribute to the transformation of televisual styles, aesthetics, forms and other techniques of TV production, distribution and consumption.

Villarejo’s approach to queer TV culture, as well as her emphasis on media technology, policy and historicity, rejects an understanding of TV as largely obligated to offer (or to liberate) ‘realistic’ or ‘politically correct’ images of sociocultural minorities that are considered repressed or invisible in mainstream culture. Instead, her approach is an effort to challenge the ‘repressive hypothesis’ conceptualised by Foucault. As Foucault states in his study of the proliferation of discourses on sex in Western societies, the repressive hypothesis combines ‘the revelation of truth, the overturning of global laws, the proclamation of a new day to come, and the promise of a certain felicity’. In this way, the hypothesis promotes the idea that ‘through European history we have moved from a period of relative openness about our bodies and our speech to an ever increasing repression and hypocrisy’. Questioning this assumption, Foucault calls for a more sophisticated understanding of the discursive formation of discourse through which power and knowledge are communicated and circulated through language, signs and behaviour within specific contexts. As Foucault illustrates, the repressive hypothesis is just one of the numerous mechanisms in modern society that aims to generate, legitimise and valorise ‘true’ discourses on sex.

Foucauldian discourse analysis has been widely applied in contemporary TV studies. For instance, American TV scholar Jason Mittell employs discourse

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155 Ibid., p. 6.
156 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, p. 105.
158 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish (New York: Pantheon, 1977).
159 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, p. 23.
analysis to study TV genre.\textsuperscript{160} Mittell sees genres as ‘discursive practices’, which are both ‘a property and function of discourse’.\textsuperscript{161} As he argues, by examining generic discourses, TV scholars are able to uncover the means by which ‘historically specific systems of thought … that work to define cultural experience within larger systems of power’ are formed, communicated and circulated.\textsuperscript{162} In addition, How Wee Ng demonstrates in his discourse analysis of Chinese TV censorship—often believed to be highly prohibitive and rigid—that censorial practices on Chinese TV dramas can be extremely multifaceted, productive and stimulative of public creativity and debate.\textsuperscript{163}

My research adopts and develops these ways of applying Foucauldian discourse analysis to TV studies. Moreover, following Villarejo’s approach, rather than looking at representations of explicitly self-identified LGBTQ people and cultures on TV, I pay attention to queer meanings, connotations and symbols that are enabled, circulated and sometimes interrupted in the glocalising discourse of TV formats in the face of a dominant sociocultural reality largely characterised by heteronormativity and patriarchy. In so doing, my analysis seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. Contemporary Chinese society remains largely heteronormative, patriarchal and homophobic. Meanwhile, China’s TV programmes that ‘show abnormal sexual relationships and behaviors, such as incest, same-sex relationships, sexual perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual violence, and so on’ are routinely censored by the party-state’s media regulators.\textsuperscript{164} Against this background, in what ways are queer forms of female gender and sexuality made apparent in formatted shows?

2. Are dominant ideologies and discourses, such as the ones on constructing and regulating a normatively gendered and sexualised China, negotiated by the queer glocalisation of variety TV format? And, if so, how is this negotiation between dominant and queer cultures achieved?

3. How has this emerging queer TV culture been enabled, shaped or complicated by the flows and convergence of global queer and TV knowledge? What is the relationship between this queer TV culture and


\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., p. 8.

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{163} Ng, ‘Rethinking Censorship in China’, pp. 87-103.

self-identified LGBTQ subjects and their cultures off-screen in 21st century Chinese society?

To answer these questions, Chapters Two, Three and Four in this thesis present individual case studies. Each case study begins with a brief historical review of the emergence of the particular glocalised format or genre in China. This historicisation of adapted formats and genres reveals the deep-seated queer-glocal nature of Chinese TV that has been in close dialogue with patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies, broadcasting and technological developments, and media and cultural policies and regulations. Close attention is paid to the constant negotiations and pushbacks between traditional Chinese norms of female gender and sexuality, the party-state’s neoliberal-cum-cosmopolitan policies, contemporary China’s (often gendered and sexualised) self-imagining and -performance, and Chinese digital and participatory cultures built around queer fantasies and expressions in the new millennium. My discussion reveals that these queerly glocalised formats and images work on multiple levels to simultaneously challenge, compromise and reinvigorate binarist assumptions embedded in the predominantly heteronormative and patriarchal Chinese televisual and social-political arenas, such as the dualisms of regionality-nationality, locality-globality, East-West, homogeneity-heterogeneity, femininity-masculinity and heterosexuality-homosexuality. It is through simultaneously breaking down and reconfiguring these binary norms within a highly commercialised context—the duality of queer glocality—that formatted shows provide both openings and constraints for queer sentiments, significations and longings.

Although my research is contextualised in post-2000 China, the shows selected for case studies either began or were revived in the 2010s when China’s glocalisation of TV formats reached its height. Therefore, a further aim of this study is to contextualise and shed light on the ways in which the growing convergence of digital and TV cultures in the 2010s, such as that manifested on live-streaming and video-sharing websites, in mobile

applications for participating in and streaming TV programmes, and digital editing technologies for TV production and distribution, has contributed to the process of queer glocalisation. Viewed as a whole, the thesis explores how these interrelated, multi-layered power struggles engrained in China’s TV industry, state ideologies and technological developments play out. It also investigates how these power struggles and related controversies in different sociocultural dimensions contribute to the emergence of ambiguous media spaces for circulating and negotiating queer meanings in the mainstream society of contemporary China.

5. An emerging queer pop in post-2000 China

As delineated above, my thesis aims to map out a sophisticated picture of the increasingly glocalised TV culture in 21st-century China that thrives on a constant interplay of queer making and normative revision. My analysis identifies a highly commercialised, mainstream form of Chinese queer TV, in which queer cultures and TV formats intersect uncomfortably with the party-state’s logics of globalisation, modernisation and marketisation. I conceptualise this queer TV culture’s self-conflicted relationship with politically energised LGBTQ cultures and activism as the epitome of ‘queer sensationalism’.

I coined the term ‘queer sensationalism’ in my previous study of the Chinese music industry’s blatant commercialisation of visibly tomboyish female singers. It describes a burgeoning yet worrying ‘queer pop’ phenomenon in post-2010 China, in which gender and sexual nonnormativities are often framed within fictional and ephemeral theatrical performances. Norm-defying public figures and media images are highly marketable and profitable in the contemporary Chinese entertainment industry because they appeal to a wide range of audiences with diverse gender, sexual and cultural interests. Yet, these non-traditional representations are simultaneously depoliticised as light-hearted and entertaining. Thus, queer images of gendered expressions, relationships, bodies and forms of desire in pop culture negate their potential

association with ‘real-world’ LGBTQ identities and politics that have been considered sensitive, reflective of a ‘dark’, ‘abnormal’ side of society, and thus censorable by the official media regulators. Through this process, these nonnormative forms of doing, becoming and being in China’s public and popular cultural spaces have drawn heavily on and capitalised on LGBTQ-related meanings and sentiments. Ultimately, however, they have further marginalised certain kinds of gender and sexual minority cultures, such as transgenderism and lesbianism, that are less constructive for the formation of ‘positive’ public celebrity personas or, more generally, for the maintenance of a ‘harmonious’ media environment.¹⁶⁷

It is worth emphasising that my conceptualisation of this problematic queer pop also guards against the cultural conflation of mainstream media representations of non-identity-based queer performances, personas, relationships and characters with the LGBTQ social reality that has been prevalent in contemporary Chinese media and popular cultural studies. For instance, in their 2012 study on the reality TV competition Super Voice Girl, Jeroen de Kloet and Stefan Landsberger claim that the show presented a ‘relatively safe’ public space for displaying and playing with ‘different gendered and sexed selves’.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, Camila Bassi’s 2016 research argues that the popularity of (possibly) lesbian participants on the show propelled the emergence of a ‘lesbian subculture’ in the off-screen public space of Shanghai.¹⁶⁹ While this body of scholarship sheds light on the potential for gender-nonnormative images on Chinese TV to increase the visibility of gender and sexual minorities in the real world, it often overlooks the fact that these queer images in the media do not necessarily represent nonnormative real-life gender and sexual identities. Using the framework of queer sensationalism, my interpretation highlights the intricate negotiations

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.
and confrontations between queer media and identity-based LGBTQ cultures in the off-screen world.

In particular, my use of the term ‘sensationalism’ draws on academic debates on an assumed antagonistic relationship between ‘the realistic’ and ‘the sensational’ in classic Anglophone literary studies. Sensationalism was conceived as a generic term for ‘antirealistic’\textsuperscript{170} or ‘non-realist’\textsuperscript{171} novels that ‘strongly diverged from mainstream realism’.\textsuperscript{172} Yet, later scholarship questions this dichotomy and reveals that ‘the formulation of “the sensational” is an essential, constitutive strategy which reified “the realistic” in ways which had been unachievable before’.\textsuperscript{173} Most of the discussions of the relation between sensationalism and realism in literary studies centre on scholarly investigations of Victorian realism in sensationalist fiction. Yet, the mutually constitutive relationship between realism and sensationalism is also particularly useful and applicable for understanding today’s Chinese queer pop.

My readings of formatted shows in this thesis help to further explicate, substantiate and extend the concept of queer sensationalism. Viewing the formatted shows as one of many concrete examples of queer sensationalism, my analysis of China’s queer glocalisation of TV formats helps to demystify a ubiquitous, profitable, queer pop culture that has arisen in today’s Chinese entertainment industry. As my case studies reveal, this queer TV trend successfully distances itself, in diverse ways and through various televisual-cultural techniques, from identity-based LGBTQ media, groups and politics, thus evading the constant official censoring of LGBTQ-related content in public communicative spaces. Nevertheless, this ‘mainstream’ form of queer TV draws on gestures, symbols and performative acts closely associated with

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{171} Laurie Garrison, \textit{Science, Sexuality and Sensation Novels} (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 117.
  \item\textsuperscript{172} Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, \textit{Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels} (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 1.
\end{itemize}
inter-Asian and global LGBTQ cultures. It is through these negotiative, compromising means that a queer media space is made possible in a highly patriarchal and normative society.

Moreover, this continuous struggling, reinventing process of queer pop emerging from a normative reality showcases the necessity of going beyond binarist understandings of sociocultural formations and processes. It also cautions against analyses of cultural forms and phenomena that tend to be devoid of attention to cultural shaping, contestations and mergings across time and space. Its constitutive, fluid and performative features can be expounded by means of Raymond Williams’s perceptive model of culture as ‘dominant’, ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’.174

Williams’s model is a revision and extension of Antonio Gramsci’s notion of ‘hegemony’.175 As Williams explains, hegemony is

a live system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It is … a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes.176

According to Williams, hegemony ‘does not just passively exist as a form of dominance, it has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged’ on a daily basis through everyday lived experience.177 Williams contributes to this conceptual model of hegemony by theorising ‘dominant’, ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ cultures. The ‘residual’ is comprised of not merely cultural elements from the past (or as described by Williams, ‘archaic’) but ‘effectively formed in the past … [and] still active in the [contemporary] cultural process’.178 In contrast, the ‘emergent’ is the ‘new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships [that] are continually being created’.179 Yet, the emergent culture is not simply ‘novel’;

174 Williams, Marxism and Literature, pp. 121-127.
176 Ibid., p. 110.
177 Ibid., p. 112.
178 Ibid., p. 122.
179 Ibid., p. 123.
rather, it gradually comes to life through reworking and struggling over both dominant and residual cultural forms, values and systems. Both residual and emergent cultures might, but need not be, ‘alternative or oppositional’ to the effective dominant culture. Some aspects and elements of the dominant culture can be either residual ones that are incorporated into the dominant system in order to sustain its efficacy, or emergent ones that are merely new manifestations and stages of the current dominant form. Enlightened by Williams’s theorisation, my research sees China’s queer TV culture, which was brought about by the boom of TV format adaptation, appropriation, innovation and hybridisation, as an epitome of an emergent queer-sensationalist pop culture. This emergent queer pop is neither necessarily subversive of nor submissive to China’s hegemonic sociocultural and political-economic systems characterised by heteronormativity, patriarchy, nationalism and capitalism in the 21st century. Yet, its emergence is a powerful proof of queer’s omnipresence in constituting and transforming media culture, social development and subject formation in an age of globalisation.

6. Chapter breakdowns

As discussed in this introductory chapter, this thesis examines a ‘queer-glocalist’ phenomenon emerging and thriving through Chinese TV of the 21st century. This queer TV culture has been facilitated by a series of cultural-political events, digital technological transformations and neoliberal economic reforms of the past two decades that occurred in the context of a global economy. Developing the critical framework of ‘queer glocalisation’ from global TV and queer studies, this research does not directly focus on seeking, reading and archiving televisual representations of explicitly self-identified LGBTQ groups and cultures. Instead, my exploration in this thesis is set to scrutinise the televisual language and discursive practices that enable, revise, circulate and sometimes also interrupt queer meanings, connotations and symbols flowing in and through mass media and public spaces.

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180 Ibid.
To achieve this goal, this thesis is organised into six chapters: an introductory chapter, a background review chapter, three main chapters devoted to case studies and a conclusion. In the introductory chapter, I discuss the research subject, questions, goals and methodologies. I also present an overview of the key terms and relevant theoretical framework from the intersected fields of global TV and global queer studies.

In Chapter One, I briefly review the historical development and current state of Chinese TV culture, with a focus on TV formats. I also elaborate my queer readings of cultural-historical imaginaries of female gender and sexuality in modern and contemporary China in the face of an increasingly globalised world. Particularly, I look at literary-televisual representations of female gender and sexuality, especially the nonnormative ones, in both modern and contemporary China. Furthermore, I present my deconstructive analysis of the censorial practices and structures in contemporary Chinese entertainment industries. I explicate that post-2000 China’s official censorship system has contradictorily enabled discursive queer practices, expressions and pleasure in its mainstream media and public spaces. In so doing, I reveal the queer nature of Chinese TV culture, which are further articulated and mediated through China’s glocalisation of TV formats in the 21st century. While my thesis highlights the importance to decouple gender from sexuality and disassociate womanhood from femininity in Chinese queer media and pop cultural studies, it is also impossible to fully understand Chinese female gender and sexual ideals without an examination of the queer and hegemonic discourses on Chinese male gender and sexuality. Therefore, I discuss Chinese and inter-Asian male masculinities and related cultures in various sections of the main chapters in the thesis.

In the following three main chapters (Chapters Two, Three and Four), I offer in-depth critical analyses of three representative formatted programmes. The first case study discussed in Chapter Two examines the talk show, *The Jinxing Show* (Shanghai Dragon TV, China, 2015–2017), hosted by the male-to-female (MTF) Chinese transsexual celebrity Jin Xing. This show was formatted from Western late-night talk shows, but also contains many
features of American daytime talk shows, such as the ones of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (ABC, USA, 1986–2011) and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (NBC, USA, 2003–present). Meanwhile, the talking style and celebrity persona construction of Jin on the show also heavily drew on socialist and postsocialist Chinese-specific social-political politics and public cultures. I first briefly introduce the general context and development of Chinese talk shows as an imported, appropriated TV genre. My analysis of the show’s aesthetics, televisual styles and talk themes demonstrates that *The Jinxing Show* exemplified a multi-layered transgression and appropriation of local and global cultures, formats and genres. Its queer-glocal format allowed Jin to promote a Chinese form of quasi-feminist, cosmopolitan cultural citizenship. In the process, Jin constantly refashioned traditional Chinese gender ideals, supported the party-state’s revisions of neoliberalism and legitimised different kinds of inequality and hierarchy along gender, ethnic and class lines. While these queer-glocal features of the show allowed some queer moments, images and pleasure, Jin managed to transform her trans female identity into ‘post-trans’ appeal on the show that merged patriotic, nationalistic, hetero-patriarchal expressions. This talk show largely remains a manifestation of queer sensationalism, where a supposedly controversial transsexual personality was not only allowed to speak for and about heterosexual women’s familial-marital lives but also idolised as a feminist and patriotic role model on TV. Nevertheless, my analysis of *The Jinxing Show* also highlights a certain degree of queer sincerity in Jin’s talk, which was made possible by the programme’s merging of Western talk show formats with local gendered TV and comedic talk cultures, characterised by a conversational, self-narrating style and elitist and patriarchal traditions. Through her dialogue and dance performances and the show’s hybrid live-studio settings, Jin was able to openly discuss her transition, her lived experiences as a transsexual wife and mother and her knowledge of – often queer-tinged – global pop icons and media news. Her sincere self-narration of her own queer desires and her past, as well as her sharp social commentaries, encouraged audiences to interact with her on the show or via her social media portals about politically sensitive issues. Ultimately, the doubleness of queer glocality in her talk show opened up spaces for certain
gender and sexual minorities, who were both cosmopolitan and patriotic, to publicly negotiate their positions and their visibility as ‘desirable’ Chinese citizens.

Chapter Three discusses the second case study devoted to the Idol-formatted Chinese reality singing competition, *Super Voice Girl* (Hunan TV, China, 2004–2006, 2009, 2011, 2016). This show featured many young, tomboyish (or androgynous), cross-dressing female participants. Some of its participants had already gained wide popularity as lesbian celebrities in the Chinese cyberspace before their participation in the show. Over the years, *Super Voice Girl* had also incorporated and revised many stylistic elements of the Western reality programmes, such as the ones of *Fame Academy* (BBC One, UK, 2002–2003) and *Big Brother* (Veronica, Netherlands, 1999–present). Inspired by scholarly literature dedicated to the ‘depoliticisation’ of Chinese TV, my investigation of the show explores how and why the queer images of its participants were drawing on yet also depoliticised from real-life lesbian-related identity politics and thus rendered a form of entertaining pop culture. I first provide a brief overview of the history and development of this reality competition format and genre in China. Then, I explore *Super Voice Girl*’s queer female stardom that had been constructed and constantly revised between 2005 and 2016. My analysis pays particular attention to the format, style and stardom of the show’s 2016 season. My reading reveals that the show’s latest transformation into an Internet-based TV programme, as well as diverse gender-nonnormative elements and traditions it appropriated from inter-Asian and global cultures, further shaped its queer glocality. As I discuss in the last section of Chapter Three, the duality of queer glocalisation is mostly made possible by the contested ‘realness’ of this reality TV programme. For instance, *Super Voice Girl*’s producers used foreign-style decorations to create a female homoerotic fantasy setting, which largely positioned the queer intimacies between its participants within an ‘unreal’ or ‘non-Chinese’ world and thus helped them evade official censorship and public criticism of Chinese lesbianism. Meanwhile, the increased

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181 The international *The Academy* franchise is also known as *Star Academy* (TVE/TeleCinco, Spain, 2001–present).
participation of self-identified lesbians in this formatted reality TV show throughout the years, as well as its ever-expanding heteronormative and queer fan bases in cyberspace, indicates that both performers/celebrities and viewers have been actively drawing on cosmopolitan fashion styles and androgynous beauty norms (which are off-screen Chinese or inter-Asian reality) to negotiate the ‘authenticity’ of female homosociality and homoeroticism as they are represented on reality TV. Drawing on Judith Butler’s thesis of the heterosexual matrix,\textsuperscript{182} I understand the show’s queer-glocal format as a ‘perverse matrix’ of mainstream Chinese media in which nonnormative female genders were performed, celebrated and proliferated, yet simultaneously normalised and differentiated from female sexual nonnormativities. I argue that this success of Super Voice Girl’s queer female stardom and the enhanced visibility of certain forms of female masculinity in Chinese public space and culture were underpinned by a persistent negation of the lesbian connotation of its queer female representations.

The final case study is presented in Chapter Four and addresses the celebrity impersonation show Your Face Sounds Familiar (Hunan TV, China, 2012–2014). The show featured cross-gender (and often interethnic and transcultural) performances primarily by Chinese-speaking celebrities. Adapted from the original Spanish version Tu Cara Me Suena (Endemol/Antena 3, Spain, 2011–present), the show heavily drew on East Asian androgynous personas and cross-dressing acts, as well as Western drag visual and performing cultures. I first discuss the formation of a Chinese form of ‘global queer gaze’ in the show by looking at the history and characteristics of Chinese celebrity-participation TV, impersonation shows and impersonation activities that appropriate local, inter-Asian and Western gender cultures. Different from the original thesis of ‘global gaze’ by Dennis Altman that was problematically drawn on and practicing a colonialist imagination of the non-West,\textsuperscript{183} I illustrate that this Chinese global queer gaze


was a reversed one to create or imagine the non-Chinese others at the global scale with enormous normalising and essentialising power. Through such a gaze, the show deployed certain queer-natured televisual-cultural techniques to re-normalise its cross-gender impersonation performances and promote various forms of sociocultural discriminations toward gender, sexual, ethnic and class-based minorities in transcultural contexts. In the process, although some norm-disrupting and boundary-transgressing acts were allowed or even encouraged, the show recuperated an official image of Chinese womanhood as heteronormatively gendered and ethnically essentialised, thereby contributing to a hetero-nationalistic self-imagining of China on the global stage. Taking certain representative sequences and performances of two of popular female celebrity participants as examples, I demonstrate that the show framed impersonations of socioculturally othered groups as comedic, hyperbolic or even failed on-screen acts within a Chinese post-feminist framework. This careful mediation ultimately maintained the imagined (gender, sexual and cultural) normality, modernity, civility and superiority of China and Chineseness. At the same time, *Your Face Sounds Familiar*'s combination of the boundary-transgressing features of impersonation TV shows (e.g., trespassing gender, linguistic and geocultural boundaries) and the parodic, performative nature of East Asian impersonation practices (e.g., cosplay and traditional Chinese cross-dressing theatrical performances) brought the duality of queer glocalisation to the forefront. The show’s gender-nonnormative, ethnic-Chinese female celebrities were empowered – and, in some cases, iconised as Chinese-specific post-feminists who reject, albeit temporarily, local traditional female gender and sexual expectations – to enact global pop-cultural scenes in which China and Chinese cultures were recentred as normative in order to queer and criticise Western gender ideals and systems.

The concluding chapter is dedicated to a glimpse at other emerging queer TV genres and formats that have been enabled or proscribed by Chinese media censorship transformations, cyber televisual platforms, and digital media and participatory practices in the new millennium. These queer televisual forms include online-distributed and -consumed programmes, time-travel dramas,
and cross-media adapted and produced LGBTQ-themed dramas, talk shows and reality TV. Moreover, my analysis of these queer-fuelled televisual forms and productions touches upon the possibilities and problems of today’s Chinese queer entertainment, while revealing that structural, political and technological transformations in the 2010s have worked together to perpetuate the burgeoning of China’s queer pop. In addition, in revisiting my theorisation of the queer-glocal TV culture in this thesis, I discuss the significance and implication of my research in the establishing and developing of a novel, fertile scholarly field, ‘global queer TV studies’. Future research directions and promising topics in Chinese and global queer TV studies are also briefly explored. I highlight that as the first scholarly engagement to combine global TV studies and global queering theories in its in-depth, critical exploration of Chinese TV cultures in post-2000, this study not only contributes to the current scholarship in global media studies, queer studies and gender, feminist and sexuality studies but also brings academic knowledge in these disciplines into critical conversations through a de-Western-centric, interdisciplinary lens.
Chapter One

The queer roots and routes of China’s female televisual images

1. Introduction

As discussed in the introductory chapter, both ‘queer’ and ‘glocalisation’ theories can provide productive perspectives when researching public and popular cultural discourses in contemporary China. While ‘queer’ as a critical framework helps one to uncover the ways in which cultures and practices ‘oppose norms through disturbing definitions and legitimisations’, the ‘glocal’ theory challenges hierarchical, rigid understandings and representations of the global and the local by revealing the mutual shaping of global and local knowledge during transcultural encounters. More concretely, in more recent queer China studies, such as in Hongwei Bao’s 2018 monograph *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China* and Petrus Liu’s 2015 monograph *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*, Western-originated queer theories have been revised and broadened to interrogate China’s national and political projects surrounding the ideals of socialism, Marxism and neoliberalism. Meanwhile, in the 2008 anthology edited by Dorren D. Wu, *Discourses of Cultural China in the Globalizing Age*, the glocalisation thesis is retooled to unveil the fantasy of a ‘Cultural China’ or a ‘Greater China’, that is, ‘the cultural/communities of practice in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and/or Taiwan’ as a discourse formed by discursive practices during global flows and imaginings.

Taking my cue from the body of previous scholarship discussed in the introductory chapter, I develop a generative employment of the two abovementioned powerful lenses, ‘queer’ and ‘glocal’. To that end, in this thesis, I bring together global TV studies and global queering theories to explore today’s Chinese formatted TV shows that feature non-identity-based queer connotations, personas and narratives. My conjunctive approach,

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‘queer glocalisation’, does not simply juxtapose two media and cultural studies methodologies whose logics run parallel. Rather, on the one hand, in my analysis, I regard the glocal development of Chinese TV, particularly, the post-2000 surge and popularity of formatted programmes, as a queer-charged discourse. On the other, I understand China’s queer pop culture, transmitted and enlarged through TV formatting, as a glocal manifestation that draws on and reinvents both local traditions and global knowledge. To further illustrate the intertwining, mutually constitutive relationship between these two televisual-cultural discourses epitomised in post-2000 China’s TV format adaptation, appropriation, hybridisation and innovation, it is necessary to undertake a brief background review of Chinese TV culture, the development of Chinese TV formatting, modern and contemporary China’s public cultural imaginaries surrounding female genders and sexualities, and Chinese media censorship systems concerning homosexuality. Through the review presented in this chapter, I excavate the queer essence of Chinese TV and public cultures that has been made visible, commodified and toyed with in the boom of post-2000 formatted variety TV.

2. The emergence of TV formats in China

China’s TV broadcasting and related sociocultural discourses do not have a long history, nor do the appearance and conceptualisation of TV formats. TV broadcasting in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) began with the establishment of Beijing Television in 1958.\textsuperscript{4} Yet, Chinese TV remained a state-controlled, ideologically and administratively centralised, propagandistic medium until the country’s postsocialist turn in 1978.\textsuperscript{5} As Chinese media scholars Wanning Sun and Lauren Gorfinkel report, during the first two decades of Chinese TV’s emergence and expansion as a ‘new’

\textsuperscript{4} Xiaoping Li, ‘The Chinese Television System and Television News’, \textit{The China Quarterly} 126 (1991), p. 340. Here I use the politically endowed word, ‘PRC’, to refer to China as a nation-state governed by the Chinese Communist Party. This use highlights the fact that the earliest year to initiate TV technology as a way of mass communication in modern China was almost one decade after the founding of PRC in 1949. Before the birth of Chinese TV, newspapers and cinema were major forms of socialist mass media in China.

form of mass media, it ‘carried news, documentary films and light entertainment programmes’. In addition, at the time, TV was ‘transmitted only in the Beijing area, in black and white, and broadcast for a couple of hours four times a week to a small number of people who had access to television sets’.

Before 1978, a number of national and international social-political upheavals and historical traumas considerably hindered the development of Chinese televisual technologies and industry. Some major events and disturbances included the CCP’s split from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (also known as the Sino-Soviet split) in the mid-1950s; the three-year severe nationwide famine between 1959 and 1961, for which the Communist Party’s radical economic campaign, ‘The Great Leap Forward’ (1958-1962) was partially responsible; and the ten years of chaos that accompanied the political movement ‘The Great Cultural Revolution’ (1966-1976). Because of the turmoil resulting from these events, Chinese TV production, broadcasting and consumption were regionally scaled and ideologically monolithic. Therefore, Chinese TV at the time had less of a sociocultural impact on public culture than newspapers, cinema and ‘Chinese socialist posters’, which was a key form of socialist propaganda that was instrumental in constructing Chinese socialist civilisation and modernity. At the same time, the importing of foreign news, programmes and films for local TV audiences was limited to Beijing Television and remained under strict political control during the socialist years. In Sun and Gorfinkel’s words, the establishment of the Chinese TV broadcast system during the Cold War era was primarily ‘an act of political necessity’. As Sun and Gorfinkel find, during those years, TV

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9 Ibid.
served as ‘an important mobilization tool in political campaigns and [as] the “mouthpiece” of the central government … to disseminate [the party-state’s] policies and directives at all levels’.\(^\text{12}\)

Following its post-revolutionary economic and political transformations under the slogan of ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ in the late 1970s, China participated in the global economy by engaging in a series of restructurings of its economic-political, international and social organisations and policies.\(^\text{13}\) As Michael Webber, Mark Wang and Ying Zhu’s research shows, the economic experiments and restructurings of this period, especially the ones after 1978, aimed at the ‘opening up’ (\textit{kaifang}) and ‘marketisation’ of various sectors of Chinese society.\(^\text{14}\) They eventually resulted in the rapid commercialisation and ‘decentralisation’ of the Chinese TV industry in the early 1990s.\(^\text{15}\)

For instance, Beijing Television was renamed CCTV in 1978 and has served as ‘the national-level broadcaster’ since then.\(^\text{16}\) Television advertising began in China in 1979 and became a major source of revenue for TV production during the 1980s.\(^\text{17}\) Moreover, the industry experienced exponential growth in the number and size of terrestrial and cable broadcasters during the postsocialist years.\(^\text{18}\) The basic four-level structure of the Chinese TV industry—its central, provincial, municipal and county sectors—that had

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 24.


\(^{14}\) Ibid.


\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 25. Also see, Zhao, \textit{Media, Market, and Democracy in China}.

\(^{18}\) This growth in the quantity of Chinese TV stations and TV sets owned by individuals was accompanied by local economic progresses, the development of transmission technologies and significant changes in media policies during 1980s. For detailed discussions, see Yu Huang, ‘Peaceful Evolution: The Case of Television Reform in Post-Mao China’, \textit{Media, Culture and Society} 16:2 (1994), pp. 217-241; Michael Keane, ‘As a Hundred Television Formats Bloom, A Thousand Television Stations Contend’, \textit{Journal of Contemporary China} 11: 30 (2002), pp. 5-16; and Sun and Gorfinkel, ‘Television, Scale and Place-Identity’, p. 22.
been established during the socialist era remained. Yet, the hierarchical power relationship of its top-down control model was changed significantly, along with the government’s cutting of financial sponsorship to TV stations at all levels from 1983.

These fiscal and administrative liberalisations transformed Chinese TV into a ‘financially self-reliant’ industry that relied ‘strongly on market forces and commercial interests to operate’. As Michael Keane’s research reveals, in the new market-driven TV industry, still under the ideological supervision of the national media regulator, the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT), competition for ratings and broadcasting reach between CCTV, the provincial stations and other ‘privately owned and operated media systems’ intensified. As pointed out by Ruoyun Bai and Geng Song, the popularity of ‘television entertainment’ (dianshi yule), especially in the forms of TV serials and variety programmes, has increased among both TV producers and audiences since the late 1980s, and these entertainment-focused genres have become more dominant than the more politically loaded, less lucrative news programmes.

In fact, the development of China’s television entertainment during this marketisation and globalisation of the local TV industry has occurred in several stages. A number of historical TV industry studies, such as the one by

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19 Sun and Gorfinkel, ‘Television, Scale and Place-Identity’, p. 22.
20 Ibid., pp. 24-25.
21 Ibid., p. 25.
22 MRFT was the prototype of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT)—a national-level central division in Chinese media censorship and regulations—that has been restructured and renamed several times since 1982. As I discuss later in this chapter, between June 1998 and March 2013, the executive agency had been reorganized and renamed as SARFT. Between March 2013 and March 2018, it was known as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). Currently, it is restructured as the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). For detailed discussions, see Chang, China’s Window on the World; and Yik Chan Chin, ‘Policy Process, Policy Learning, and the Role of the Provincial Media in China’, Media, Culture & Society 33:2 (2011), pp. 193-210.
Sun and Gorfinkel, indicate that the 1980s’ Chinese TV was filled with ‘soap operas from Japan, the United States, Mexico, and Brazil’. However, this earlier trend to import foreign shows via official, legal venues was soon replaced by local TV formatting. As Michael Keane and Joy Danjing Zhang’s research shows, format adaptation and appropriation gradually became more popular than ‘buying canned (finished) foreign shows’ in the late 1990s. Another study by Michael Keane and Bonnie Liu also demonstrates that ‘from 1958 until the early 1990s, all television programs—television serial dramas, documentaries and entertainment genres—were made by professionals in dedicated production units within television stations’. As Keane and Zhang find, this was mainly because officially imported foreign programmes needed to go through extra post-production procedures, including ‘dubbing or subtitling’ and passing the party-state’s media censorship. As my further analysis later in this chapter indicates, China’s media and online censorship systems have been characterised by ambiguity, inconsistency and ‘generative’-ness within a ‘panoptic’ social structure. The often contradictory attitudes of the official censors at the various levels of TV production and broadcasting, as well as the self-censorship of media practitioners who ‘tend to produce materials … [that are] commercially successful’ and less politically offensive to ‘the conservative morals of mainstream Chinese consumers’, often lead to the censoring of information that is incompatible with the political-ideological projects of the state and to

26 Ibid., pp. 2-3. Also, see Keane, ‘It’s All in a Game’, p. 60; and Wen, *Television and the Modernization Ideal*.
27 Keane, and Zhang, ‘Where Are We Going?’, p. 631.
29 Ibid.
unreasonable (self-)crackdowns on ‘politically innocuous’ content in public spaces.32

By contrast, transnationally adapting formats by legal means is believed to reflect ‘the willingness of broadcasters to pay for the outsourcing of risk’.33 As Keane and Zhang note, especially regarding the Chinese TV industry, ‘[f]ormats are entertainment based, easily localised and for this reason not likely to cause as much conflict with censors as canned programmes’.34 Therefore, throughout the 1990s, there was a boom in the Chinese copying of foreign TV. Various TV genres and formats, such as those for soap operas, games and quiz shows, either legally imported or unofficially ‘copied’ from successful foreign productions, were prevalent in the industry, especially among provincial TV stations.35 However, most of these productions were pale copycats that lacked innovation and reinvention.36 Meanwhile, as Keane finds, format (xingshi) as a televisual concept did not emerge in the Chinese media industry until 2002.37 As recorded in Keane’s research, an alternative word, ‘cloning’ (kelong) was more often used to describe such ‘mimicking’ practices.38

Notably, starting in the late 1990s, a series of cultural-political events and neoliberal transformations occurred, which expedited China’s integration into 21st-century global capitalism.39 For instance, some national and/or global media and political events, such as the British handover of sovereignty over Hong Kong to China in 1997, China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, significant increases in information exchange and human mobilisation (most often in the forms of entertainment media and migratory flows) within China and internationally, and the unprecedented

34 Keane, and Zhang, ‘Where Are We Going?’, p. 631.
36 Ibid.
38 Ibid., p. 90.
success of the reality TV shows, *Survivor* (Sveriges TV, Sweden, 1997-present) and *Big Brother* in 2002, all captured the world’s attention. They combined to facilitate transcultural traffic, significantly changing the Chinese TV industry. Particularly, these events resulted in the increased awareness, conceptualisation and wide (though not necessarily legal) appropriation of TV ‘formats’ in China from 2002, especially those of competition-style reality TV, dating shows and lifestyle TV. In the second half of the first decade of the 2000s, following this globalising (or globally formatting) of Chinese entertainment TV, China witnessed an explosion in the number of formatted variety shows, beginning with the huge success of the *Idol*-inspired Chinese singing competition, *Super Voice Girl* in 2005.

Admittedly, many formatted Chinese shows were unlicensed clones of either foreign programme ideas or successful formatted local shows. This was partly due to the lack of any ‘legal mechanism … to prosecute format content predators’. In addition, Chinese TV producers had been actively mixing, hybridising and altering various aspects of foreign programmes, genres and televisual styles using both legal and illicit appropriative technologies for a number of years. To a certain degree, these creative activities, together with the emergence of multi-media broadcasting and participatory platforms for TV distribution and consumption, for instance, mobile TV and video-streaming and live-streaming sites, contributed to the democratisation of Chinese mass culture and led to the popularity of Chinese variety TV, much of which was based on Western reality TV formats and produced by provincial stations in the early 2010s.

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44 Ibid., pp. 88-104.
45 Keane, ‘It’s All in a Game’, p. 68; and Keane and Zhang, ‘Where Are We Going?’, p. 631. The term ‘democratisation’ is used in this body of scholarship to highlight the potential of new media to create semi-public spheres and encourage citizen participation in economic-political events and debates within an authoritarian society. It does not advocate the problematic idea that new media have the capacity to make China a democratic nation-state.
Statistical evidence shows the sudden boom in Chinese formatted TV produced by provincial stations. Keane and Zhang record that

In 2013, satellite channels were screening 13 different music talent shows at the same time, most based on imported formats. In 2013, four satellite channels, Hunan, Zhejiang, [Shanghai] Dragon and Jiangsu Satellite TV (JSTV), imported a total of 21 music and dance formats from the Netherlands, Britain, United States, Korea and Spain.\(^{46}\)

Nevertheless, during the surge in formatted variety TV (mostly reality singing competitions) that has taken place since 2000, the government has practised ‘ongoing crackdowns on provincial television’s entertainment programmes’ in order to reclaim ideological control of the mass media and public culture.\(^{47}\) For instance, in response to the enormous nationwide success of *Super Voice Girl* in 2005, elitist media officials and representatives in China criticised the show for its ‘“low” tastes’ and ‘creating a generation with an unhealthy mentality’.\(^{48}\) As Chinese media scholar Lauren Gorfinkel explicates, this form of ‘high-culture’ critique replicates the mentality of ‘the 1983 Spiritual Pollution Campaign’\(^{49}\). During this earlier political-ideological movement, conservative forces of the party-state showed ‘fear of cultural invasion, suspicion of market forces, concern for the spiritual health of the nation, preservation of national culture, fear that popular entertainment w[ould] corrupt the youth and the need to promote socialist morality’.\(^{50}\) This kind of ‘high-culture’ concern regarding foreign, especially Western, moral and cultural corruption during the globalisation of the Chinese TV industry, has constantly come to the surface in post-2010 China’s media and popular cultural regulatory stipulations and practices.

For example, later, between 2011 and 2014, the national media bureau, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), issued a series

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\(^{46}\) Keane and Zhang, ‘Where Are We Going?’, p. 631. As noted in Keane and Zhang’s research, the flows and adaptations of variety TV formats from East Asian countries, such as Japan and South Korea were quite recent practices that became predominant in the Chinese TV industry after the crackdown on the format boom in 2013. For the detailed discussion on this point, see Keane and Zhang, ‘Where Are We Going?’, pp. 632-635.

\(^{47}\) Sun and Gorfinkel, ‘Television, Scale and Place-Identity’, p. 32.

\(^{48}\) Gorfinkel, *Chinese Television and National Identity Construction*, p. 75.

\(^{49}\) Ibid.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.
of new stipulations that were together known as ‘xian yu ling’ (the Limit Entertainment Order).\textsuperscript{51} In particular, in January 2012, SARFT claimed that, in response to ‘audience complaints about the vulgarity of certain [formatted entertainment] shows’, it had decided to limit the quantity and airing time of TV entertainment, regulate the ‘quality’ of formatted shows, and increase the frequency and quantity of national news broadcasting on provincial TV during prime time (between 7:30 and 10:00 pm).\textsuperscript{52} These regulations aimed to change the so-called ‘excessive entertainisation’ (\textit{guodu yule hua}) of Chinese TV.\textsuperscript{53} That is, in Gorfinkel’s words, ‘[t]he channels were instructed to promote “healthier” programmes such as news, educational programmes and documentaries, as well as programmes that promote harmony, morality, sociability and traditional Chinese values’.\textsuperscript{54}

Intriguingly, in the 2010s, SARFT has also undergone several waves of transformation in its structure and function. In March 2013, it was merged with the General Administration of Press and Publication and renamed the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). In March 2018, for ‘further tightening the Communist government’s control of media and entertainment’, it was proposed that the SAPPRFT be replaced by a new administration ‘attached to the State Council’.\textsuperscript{55} SAPPRFT’s stipulations have inflected its own structural changes over the years. For instance, in 2013, the body issued a ‘one format policy’ that was a direct response to the overproduction and homogenisation of formatted TV in China.\textsuperscript{56} This policy ‘restrict[ed] each satellite channel to importing just one format each year, with the extra constraint that it [could not] be broadcast during prime time’.\textsuperscript{57} These constant crackdowns led to waves of internal suspensions, transformations and innovations with respect

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 71.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.; and Sun and Gorfinkel, ‘Television, Scale and Place-Identity’, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{53} Gorfinkel, \textit{Chinese Television and National Identity Construction}, p. 71
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Keane and Zhang, ‘Where Are We Going?’, pp. 631-632.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. The policy is not applicable to reality TV singing competition shows. Music programmes are allowed to be produced by each station with pre-approval by SAPPRFT, given a quota of no more than four per year.
to foreign TV adaptation and appropriation in the 2010s’ Chinese TV industry. One effective response to the decrees on limiting entertainment programmes formatted and aired by provincial stations was the cyber transformation of formatted shows in the 2010s. Especially in the second half of that decade, China has witnessed a proliferation of popular competition shows distributed and live-streamed online, the queer dimension of which has been flourishing. These queer-loaded formatted programmes have often successfully evaded TV and online censorship. I will discuss the relation, contestation and negotiation between the online feature of queerly charged formatted programmes and online media censorship on LGBTQ content in Chapter Three, in which I explore the ten-year evolution and online transformation of the earliest and most famous reality singing competition programme in China, *Super Voice Girl*.

3. The ‘national’ dimension of Chinese formatted TV culture

Global TV studies scholar Moran has argued that ‘the advent of TV formats as a central element in the new television landscape appears to signal not the disappearance of the national in favour of the global and the local, but its emphatic endurance or even reappearance’. This is especially evident from the introduction and subsequent proliferation of TV formats in China, which is briefly delineated above. Nevertheless, it should be noted that ‘the national’ characteristic of Chinese formatted TV culture is in fact an ‘adaptive’ one and visible on differing levels and in various processes of TV format adaptation, revision and hybridisation.

At the beginning of China’s economic reforms (which officially started in December 1978), the government’s globalisation and marketisation of the local media landscape facilitated the legal importation of foreign media and cultural productions. Nevertheless, the ‘cloning’ of foreign programmes did not become a common practice for generating profits in the Chinese TV industry until the late 1990s. As noted in the previous section, even in the 1990s, the term ‘format’ was neither translated into Chinese nor widely used

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as a local TV production term to describe this transnational copying practice at the time. It was around 2002 that the televisual concept ‘TV format’ (dianshi xingshi) emerged as a Chinese-specific media production strategy for ‘programme development’ and began to be used in both local industry circles and scholarly conversations. As Keane finds, towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s, a number of Western TV formats were employed as efficient catalysts of the party-state’s strategic goals of media marketisation and cultural globalisation. During the post-2010 years, the transnational adaptability and local profitability of foreign TV formats, especially those from South Korea and Japan, have been further exploited by media producers. China’s TV formatting in this new age has played a particularly central role in the state’s recent social, cultural and economic history. As my case studies in this thesis will demonstrate, global TV formats have often been adjusted, merged and mutated into new ones in the local industry in order to accommodate or evade the constantly changing censorial decrees issued by the media regulatory bureau.

According to Moran, formatted programmes can incorporate and promote the party-state’s political-ideological agenda in ‘subtle, unobtrusive, banal’ ways. Furthermore, as pointed out by another global TV scholar, Vinicius Navarro,

By revisiting an existing formula and submitting it to a new context, by evoking the memory of other adaptations and borrowing elements from them, … the local identity of the format is produced out of the interplay between repetition and creativity. And [this formatting process] privileges neither the foreign nor the domestic but what connects them.

Therefore, the emergence, prevalence, resurgence and hybridisation of TV formats have been accompanied by, and indeed mediate, the nation’s cultural, economic and political reforms. Yet, this ‘formatted’ national culture in this global age is, in Dana Heller’s words, ‘locally specific forms of global

\[60\] Ibid.
\[61\] Moran, ‘Reasserting the National?’, p. 157.
awareness that are manifestly reshaping the conventions of international television format adaptation in concert with the development of new media technologies, emergent political economies, and transformations of traditional notions of national identity’. 63 It is through these means that formatted programmes give us a unique opportunity to observe how televisual cultures reflect on, and negotiate with, not only China’s specific media policies and but also its competing social realities.

For instance, research by HK-based media scholar Anthony Y.H. Fung on globally formatted reality shows produced in the 2000s draws on Michael Billig’s concept of ‘banal nationalism’. 64 According to Billig, the political-ideological representation and reinforcement of nationalistic cultures operate in unnoticed yet omnipresent ways on a daily basis. 65 Following Billig’s view, Fung believes that Chinese formatted programmes have allowed this banality of nationalism to operate through televisual ‘symbols, language and icons’, which has ultimately produced and conveyed a form of ‘soft nationalism’ to the local TV audience. 66

Also, in their monograph Telemodernities: Television and Transforming Lives in Asia, Tania Lewis, Fran Martin and Wanning Sun note that formatted lifestyle TV programmes in China, Taiwan and India epitomise context-specific self-modernising ideals and processes. 67 As they note in the book’s introduction,

The concrete manifestations of these modern dreams in particular media contexts—dreams of ideal selfhood, good taste, appropriate consumption, optimally functioning relationships, proper gender—are very location-specific.

…

The locational specificity of people’s modern dreams is undeniable, and is indeed often connected to a sense of their homeland’s relative positioning in a global hierarchy of economic development. 68

65 See, Billig, Banal Nationalism.
67 Lewis, Martin and Sun, Telemodernities.
68 Ibid., p. 8.
Considered together, Fung’s view and Lewis, Martin and Sun’s findings show that the ‘national’ character of TV formatting is multifunctional. It can manifest in local propagandistic promotions of nationalistic cultures and identities in formatted TV productions, or in the formatted shows’ discursive reflection on culturally specific histories and realities, or in the local producers’ creative responses to official media, cultural regulations and nation-building projects. As I illustrate in the rest of the chapter, this form of ‘formatted national’ character has underpinned the queer-glocalisation of TV formats in post-2000 China. The queer performance of and response to the ‘national’ specificities in Chinese formatted programmes can be illuminated by a historical overview of public imaginaries and televisual representations of women since the birth of modern China in 1911. In this sense, my brief review of female gender and sexuality in Chinese public and media cultures in the following sections shows that female-related public imaginaries in modern and contemporary China are not only ‘national’ (e.g., nationalised and politicised) but also queer in nature.

4. Female genders and sexualities in modern and contemporary China
The modern history of Chinese female gender and sexuality has not been a static perpetuation of a traditional past nor has it taken the form of a subversive, anti-hegemonic lineal process. Since the beginning of China’s self-modernising process and the birth of Chinese feminist movements in the first decade of 20\textsuperscript{th} century, woman’s body and desire have been constantly manipulated in Chinese public culture, constituting as a major force for propelling local ideological and political projects. As the Chinese feminism scholar Tani Barlow finds, the emergence and wide use of the modern Chinese term to denote women, ‘nvxing’ (female sex), can be traced back to Chinese intellectuals’ writings and translations of Western fiction in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{69} In the introduction to the 2013 book \textit{The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory}, Chinese women’s studies scholars Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl and Dorothy Ko argue that following the May

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Fourth New Literary Movement in 1919, which signals the beginning of Chinese modernity, the use of this female-gender-focused neologism marks an age when ‘a new way of construing male-female differences on the basis of modern understandings of the sexualized human body’ emerged in Chinese culture.  

Nevertheless, Barlow finds that the use of the term, *nvxing*, by Chinese intellectuals (mostly men at the time) ‘constituted a discursive sign and a subject position in the larger frame of anti-Confucian discourse’. As Barlow believes, at the beginning of the 20th century, ‘when intellectuals overthrew the Confucius canon [prevalent in pre-modern China,] they sought the total transformation of “Chinese culture”’. Recognising Chinese women as different, independent sexual subjects was a major part of this anti-feudal, modern Chinese culture. As Barlow further explains, the emerging cultural-political discourse on *nvxing* in modern China took shape as one half of the European, exclusionary, male-female binary. … Its universal, sexological, scientistic core gave life to a psychologized personal identity. But *nüxing* was also a fulcrum for unending Confucianism and the older forms of social theory, with all its received categories.  

…

[In the 1930s, Chinese popular cultural] representations of *nüxing* reinforced a universal category of woman emerging in the new consumer society. Accordingly, *nüxing* rapidly ceased to be a Western sign and became a sign of modernity in bourgeois New China.

Later, in the 1930s and 1940s, with the aim of ‘pulling women into the anti-Japanese struggle and social revolution’, the CCP reinvented an older term ‘*funü*’ taken from the feudal Chinese language to refer to women. According to Barlow, *funü* is a term that positions ‘all women in the patrilineal family’. This ‘rhetorical recuperation’ of a historical term situated female subjects

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70 Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl and Dorothy Ko, ‘Introduction’ to *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory* (New York: Columbia University, 2013), p. 15. Different from Barlow’s view, Liu, Karl and Ko’s believe that the emergence of the word *nüxing* in China might have been influenced by Japanese culture.


72 Ibid., pp. 52-53.

73 Ibid., p. 53.

74 Ibid., p. 55.

75 Ibid., p. 56.

76 Ibid., p. 40.
within ‘two interpenetrated objects of political discourse: the state (guojia) and the family (jiating)’.\textsuperscript{77} The family, as imagined by the Communist Party and reinforced by the Maoist state policy in the late 1940s, was ‘a politicized new family reconstituted in the language of politics’.\textsuperscript{78} In Barlow’s words, this political mobilisation of family, kinship and female gender meant that ‘the body of women [became] a field of the state, … [which] opened the state to inflection by kin categories’.\textsuperscript{79}

Historian Leon Antonio Rocha elaborates the different sociocultural implications of the two terms, \textit{nvxing} and \textit{funv}, in this way:

> Whereas \textit{funv}, an earlier term, situated women in the network of family and kinship relations—their responsibilities as childbearers and mothers of the nation—\textit{nvxing}, literally ‘woman’ plus ‘sex/human nature’ (\textit{nü} plus \textit{xing}) was a neologism for a biologically sexed woman. … The discourse of \textit{funü} in Chinese feminism pointed to the participation of women in public life and their rights in society, but tended to ignore, suppress, suspend or even sometimes erase the differences between men and women. The discourse of \textit{nvxing}, on the other hand, sought to highlight women’s repressed sexuality and sexual difference, and attempted to create a new and revolutionary subjectivity for women, different from that of men.\textsuperscript{80}

This persistent politicisation and manipulation of female subjects by both China’s national modernising projects and feminist movements further escalated in the socialist years after the founding of the PRC in 1949. One political event that was particularly significant is the inception of the All-China Democratic Women’s Association (\textit{Fulian}) in 1948.\textsuperscript{81}

As a political organisation, the Women’s Association was led by several female political leaders and aimed to ‘represent’ and ‘speak for’ the female ‘masses’.\textsuperscript{82} In this respect, the bureaucratisation of the organisation epitomised the party-state’s self-modernisation in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{83} This top-down female-centred self-modernising practice was aimed at producing a public

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p. 57.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p. 58.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} Leon Antonio Rocha, ‘\textit{Xing}: The Discourse of Sex and Human Nature in Modern China’, \textit{Gender & History} 22:3 (2010), p.606.
\textsuperscript{81} Barlow, \textit{The Questions of Women}, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p. 60.
culture for ‘new China’s women’ and connecting Chinese female organisations to ‘the international socialist women’s movement’ of the time.\textsuperscript{84} Nevertheless, this goal was achieved by essentialising and politicising Chinese women ‘in the rituals of state formation’.\textsuperscript{85} The overarching ideological-political power ‘determin[ed] what, in fact, constituted a funv’.\textsuperscript{86} As sociologist Judith Stacey contends, this process helped to create a ‘new democratic patriarchy’ in the ‘new China’ that co-opted, rather than discarded, ‘Confucianist values to socialist ends’.\textsuperscript{87}

The 1950s’ socialist appropriation of women’s gender, body and sexuality to serve the nation-state’s interests became more pronounced during the years of the Cultural Revolution, which began in the mid-1960s. Notably, this chaotic period featured a number of extremely radical political campaigns, such as the notorious ‘up to the mountains and down to the villages’ movement (shangshan xiaxiang yundong). This movement forcibly exiled millions of young urban people, who expected to undertake post-secondary or college educations in cities, to rural areas of Mainland China. As Chinese media scholar Hui Faye Xiao finds, the ten-year chaos ended in 1976 and has often been conceived of as ‘a rupture [in modern Chinese history], a loss of youth, meaning, and progressive temporality’.\textsuperscript{88}

Particularly during the Cultural Revolution, the Maoist women’s liberation project popularised a form of ‘state feminism’ (also known as ‘socialist feminism’). As revealed by feminist media scholar Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, this campaign replaced gender issues with class struggles, and silenced both female gender subjectivity and ‘public discourses on sex’.\textsuperscript{89} One example of this is ‘socialist androgyny’, that is, the state-backed de-sexualising of women.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., p. 60.
\textsuperscript{89} Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, ‘From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women’s Public Sphere in China’, in Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (ed.), \textit{Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 40-22.
in public spaces. The socialist androgyny encouraged a distorted sociocultural atmosphere that forced women to wear loose-fitting, plain-coloured clothes similar to men’s clothes (fig. 1.1). As historian Emily Honig describes, the cultural-revolutionary ‘women invariably dressed as men, or more precisely, as male army combatants’.\textsuperscript{90} In addition, Honig observes that aggressive behaviours among women and ‘female militancy (meant literally), if not ferocity, were valorized’ during the revolutionary years.\textsuperscript{91} The classic role model of women constructed in this period was known as ‘iron girl’ (tie guniang). The socialist public imaginary of ‘iron girl’ emphasised young women’s active participation in ‘collective labor’, ‘social production and political engagement’.\textsuperscript{92} As discussed in the 2002 anthology edited by Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, \textit{Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader}, this socialist-androgyny culture that criticised ‘women who tried to look “feminine” … for their improper attitude’ eventually resulted in a ‘masculinization’ of Chinese women in the revolutionary years.\textsuperscript{93}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{iron_girl.jpg}
\caption{Iron girl (tie guniang).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., pp. 261-262.
\textsuperscript{92} Xiao, \textit{Family Revolution}, p. 100.
Figure 1.1: A political poster used in the Cultural Revolutionary era, stating ‘Working-class funü are the great revolutionary power’. The female image in the poster is a classic example of ‘iron girl’.

Interestingly, as noted by a number of scholars, such as Yihong Jin, Honig and Ann Anagnost, by advocating that ‘men and women are the same’ in the socialist age, this and other state-feminist policies achieved some progresses in liberating young women and girls from Confucian gender ideals prevalent in feudal China. Yet, what this political movement achieved was far from either gender equality or gender erasure for Chinese women. As noticed by Brownell and Wasserstrom, men at the time were not de-masculinised. In particular, men were not forced to dress and act in androgynous ways. Meanwhile, Jin’s research on ‘iron girls’ indicates that gender-based discrimination and exploitation of women in both the work and domestic spheres remained prevalent. Moreover, as Xiao points out, ‘the gender problems of persistent patriarchy and the double burden shouldered by married women were frequently dismissed as trivial or vulgar personal problems’. In this sense, the gender hierarchy in China’s patriarchal society was not overthrown but sustained.

More intriguingly, the historically specific female masculinity, ‘sexual sameness’ and ‘defeminisation of female appearance’ significantly shaped postsocialist China’s public culture. As Xiao describes, after the Cultural Revolution era ended in the late 1970s, China entered a post-Mao age, characterised by a radical break from previous Maoist politics and a

95 Brownell and Wasserstrom, ‘Part Five’, p. 251
96 Ibid.
97 Jin, ‘Rethinking the “Iron Girls”’, p. 628.
‘resurging discourse of liberal individualism in the intersections of society, family, and state’. \(^{100}\) Ironically, this break was achieved through both public condemnation of socialist female masculinity and the development of a market-driven Chinese society that often hyper-sexualised and hyper-feminised women in both public and private spaces. \(^{101}\) The resurgence of the term *nvxing*, for example, emphasises modern and global standards for female femininity in a self-globalising China. Moreover, Xiao identifies a practice of ‘feminizing the evil’ in Chinese male intellectuals’ writings in post-Mao years. This misogynistic practice ‘condemns Chinese women … for their over-liberated and “masculine” practices such as putting on men’s attire and doing men’s jobs during the Cultural Revolution’, believing that these masculine acts ‘degraded [Chinese women] into something “non-man, non-woman, non-human, and non-demon” (*feinan feinü feiren feigui*)’. \(^{102}\) As Xiao remarks, in this post-Mao patriarchal practice, ‘the political chaos caused by the ideological Other and the sexual chaos caused by the gendered Other are fused’. \(^{103}\)

Since the 1990s, successful women in public domains have been referred to as ‘strong women’ (*nü qiangren*), \(^{104}\) which is ‘a continuation of the concept of “iron girl,” as the disastrous outcome of women’s liberation’. \(^{105}\) They were often deemed devoid of proper modern femininity and sexual charm and were portrayed in popular media and literature as ‘often encounter[ring] problems in their love and marital lives’. \(^{106}\) In more recent years, sexist neologisms, such as ‘female Ph.D.’ (*nü boshi*), ‘manly lady’ (*nü hanzi*) and ‘leftover women’ (*sheng nü*; literally women who are left out by the heteronormative marriage market as an undesirable group) have become prevalent in contemporary Chinese public culture. These neologisms have often been used in official media and mainstream entertainment to describe single women who are over 27 years old, independent, well-educated and mentally and

\(^{100}\) Xiao, *Family Revolution*, p. 16.
\(^{101}\) Yang, ‘From Gender Erasure’, pp. 47-64; Jin, ‘Rethinking the “Iron Girls”’, p. 627.
\(^{102}\) Xiao, *Family Revolution*, p. 70.
\(^{103}\) Ibid.
\(^{104}\) The term, *nü qiangren*, is not a neologism. It was used in 1930s’ Shanghai.
\(^{105}\) Ibid., p. 100.
\(^{106}\) Ibid.
physically strong. To a certain extent, the public employment and popularity of these derogatory, misogynistic terms can be seen as a continuation of the logic of the feminisation of the evil (or an evilisation of the female) to demonise women’s independence, gender-nonnormativity and singledom. In so doing, they promote traditional Confucian gender roles that persuade women to become ‘good wife and virtuous mother’ (xianqi liangmu) in the domestic sphere.

However, it should also be noted that, in more recent practices and scholarship of Chinese feminist cultures, these terms and single, gender-nonnormative statuses are sometimes interpreted as self-contradictory, anti-patriarchal expressions, or politically charged, rebellious, though also highly problematic images of contemporary China’s new women. This revision of these terms can often be found in China’s formatted TV programmes and female celebrity cultures. For instance, Jin Li’s 2016 research on the gendered identity and linguistic discourses on Mainland China-based online talk shows illustrates that female speakers sometimes employed a form of ‘nü hanzi’ style in their self-presentation on the talk shows, such as the ‘use of “rough” talk and self-addressing terms, as well as [their] parodic stylization of girly-girl’s talk’. Nevertheless, according to Li, this seemingly feminist use of a masculine speaking style, on the one hand, ‘assigns [the female speaker] higher rank in the hierarchical and patriarchal culture’ and thus challenges the gendered boundaries and power hierarchies through a linguistic appropriation of traditionally defined male masculinity. On the other hand, the frequent use of these masculine terms and speaking styles that ‘not only mark gender and seniority but also index hierarchical and patriarchal power’

110 Ibid., p. 75.
further consolidates discrimination against and devaluing of female femininity in mainstream Chinese society.\textsuperscript{111}

Moreover, in a more elaborative study in 2016, Chulin Zhuang notes that the rise of nü hanzi culture in contemporary Chinese public and media spaces can be attributed to

\begin{itemize}
  \item the one-child policy in China … and early gender education …, which cultivate more flexible traits in girlhood. Other external factors include the impact of post-structuralism, the women’s movement, changing social and aesthetic values, the gender-neutral fashion, the sheng nü … phenomenon and [gendered pop cultural and media productions, such as] music, TV shows, and commodities.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{itemize}

Zhuang finds that to self-identify ‘as a nü hanzi is a strategy to cope with peer pressure for young women, while for their male counterparts, nü hanzi is an evaluative term that can to some degree dispel the threat from distinguished female peers’.\textsuperscript{113} However, in Zhuang’s analysis of online social media and China’s mainstream media portrayals of nü hanzi, a more sophisticated discourse on nü hanzi is identified. As Zhuang explicates, while “many Chinese young ladies now proudly label themselves” [as such], it is not feminist under the western view, nor is it necessarily linked to feminism in the Chinese context’.\textsuperscript{114} As Zhuang reveals, this has been evident in the mainstream Chinese media representations of ‘national events such as [the] Olympics, military reports and other issues in public work’, in which ‘the threatening, rude and irrational’ connotations assigned to the term nü hanzi are ‘replaced by the intelligent, courageous’ and perseverant female images.\textsuperscript{115} In these cases, ‘nü hanzi is praised and valued by audienc[es] for contributing to the national and societal welfare’, and ‘associated with excellent female characters who realize their worth by working for the nation and society’.\textsuperscript{116}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{111} Ibid., p. 74.
  \item \textsuperscript{112} Chulin Zhuang, ‘Female Masculinity in Rhetorical Encounters: The Juxtapositional Recontextualization of Tomboy and Nü Hanzi’, (Unpublished MA thesis, Miami University, 2016), p. 34.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p. 35.
  \item \textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p. 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{116} Ibid., p. 48.
\end{itemize}
This intertwining of the feminist appropriation of misogynistic culture and the nationalist revision of feminist expressions and practices, as the one uncovered in Zhuang’s study, is particularly relevant to my research. I will further explore Chinese TV’s multi-layered, queer-nature appropriation and negotiation of patriarchal, misogynistic mainstream culture in Chapter Four, in which I discuss the female images, personas and performances in the celebrity impersonation competition show *Your Face Sounds Familiar*. My readings of the non-marital status, parodic performances and masculine celebrity persona of some of the most popular female performers on the show will reveal that their queering of gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity in their impersonations in fact both disrupt normative ideals of Chinese womanhood (such as being a traditionally feminine, good wife and virtuous mother) and contribute to a more refined nationalistic construction of the public imaginaries of a modern, (hetero-)normative, essentialised Han-Chinese identity. As I detail in the following section of this chapter, this contradictory, national/political mobilisation of female gender, sexuality, body, desire and subjectivity in China’s socialist and feminist histories has transformed and complicated contemporary televisual representations of women in considerable ways.

5. Female genders and sexualities on Chinese TV

5.1. Women in Chinese TV melodramatic portrayals of love and marriage

Compared to the large body of both Chinese and Anglophone scholarship dedicated to high culture in China, such as Chinese-language cinema, Chinese TV culture remains severely underexplored. Even within the field of Chinese TV studies, TV drama has received the most scholarly attention and is considered an ‘elitist’ genre. For instance, as Ruoyun Bai and Geng Song find, before the 1990s, the official culture deemed TV dramas as ‘a televised form of “literature and art” (wenyi)’. This cultural hierarchy positioned other TV genres and formats, such as reality and game shows, as a form of

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low culture that was often neglected in earlier Chinese media scholarship. Even today, while there has been a growing body of feminist and gender studies scholarship in Chinese TV dramas, most discussions have been contextualised in a heterosexual-centric framework to unravel the mutually constitutive yet competing relationships of male masculinity and female femininity.\(^{119}\) Even though women in TV series are not the main focus of this thesis, it is necessary to look briefly at the ways in which female gender and sexuality have been represented in TV dramas and interpreted in existing scholarship to fully understand contemporary Chinese televisual discourses on womanhood.

Similar to their central role in China’s national and social-political projects, female gender and sexuality have always been the main theme of Chinese TV dramas. In particular, the love and romantic relationships of women are one of the most common themes for TV melodramas.\(^{120}\) In fact, the modern concept of ‘love’ (ai) has also played a crucial role in public imaginaries of women and homosexuality in China. Similar to the emergence and revival of the term nüxing (female sex) in modern and contemporary Chinese official and public cultures, love emerged and has been constantly reinvented as a dominant discourse in Chinese gender and sexual imaginations. Its meaning has been closely intertwined with particular historical situations and political reforms.

For instance, focusing on Chinese literature produced during the May Fourth New Literary Movement, Haiyan Lee records that the Chinese word ai (love) was deployed as ‘a symbol of freedom, autonomy, and equality’ in literary


\(^{120}\) See Xiao, *Family Revolution*; and Bai and Song, eds, *Chinese Television*. 

74
This framing of love in modern China’s elitist culture aimed to challenge traditional (premodern) Chinese values characterised by an ‘authoritarian family system, the subjugation of women, and the lack of individual freedom and autonomy’. The popularity of this term later contributed to modern sex knowledge in Chinese public culture. As Rocha finds, along with Chinese intellectuals’ translation and importation of Western scientific knowledge on sex and sexuality at the beginning of 20th century, the cultural discourse on love was appropriated in China’s self-modernising process and thus became further ‘sexualized, eroticized’ (instead of being purely platonic) in heterosexual relationships and marriage. Following this reconfiguration of love as a combination of physical and spiritual intimacies, the modern Chinese term for homosexuality, tongxing’ai (same-sex love), emerged in the 1920s as part of modern Chinese sexological knowledge. Yet, as comparative literature scholar Tze-lan D. Sang points out, during this period, ‘tongxing ai is primarily signified as a modality of love or an intersubjective rapport rather than as a category of personhood, that is, an identity’. In other words, Sang finds that same-sex love was often seen as ‘common to humanity’ or as ‘a universal emotion [that] does not necessarily conflict with marriage’.

This non-identity-based same-sex rapport implied in the use of tongxing’ai in the context of modern China resembles the ‘queer’ culture on post-2000 Chinese TV that I examine in this thesis. Nevertheless, as briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter, since the 1990s, not only has the glocalised gay identity, tongzhi (comrades), replaced tongxing’ai in Chinese public culture, but the social-political implications of love have also changed, especially for contemporary Chinese women as portrayed on TV.

122 Ibid.
123 Rocha, ‘Xing’, p. 609.
124 Ibid., p. 610.
125 Sang, The Emerging Lesbian, p. 118.
126 Ibid.
Take, for example, the first Chinese soap opera produced by the Beijing Television Arts Centre and aired nationally in 1991, *Yearnings (Kewang)*, which ‘drew on “television narratives” and television drama models from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and Brazil’.  

*Yearnings* narrates ‘a melodramatic tale of romantic loves found and lost’ between two families—one from an intellectual background; the other from the working-class—between the mid-1960s to the late 1980s. This popular drama received a lot of scholarly and audience attention. In particular, Xiao’s reading of *Yearnings* shows that by depicting female protagonist Liu Huifang’s ‘working-class background’ and ‘self-sacrificing behavior’ in her tragic familial and marital life, the drama presents a ‘good wife and wise mother’ figure on screen. Lisa Rofel’s interpretation of *Yearnings* also reveals that its storyline reimagines ‘the domesticated woman’ as a selfless socialist role model who has lived through the revolutionary years and struggles in a postsocialist, economic-reformist age. As Rofel critiques, situated in the sociocultural reality in which China self-transitioned from socialism to postsocialism and consumerism, the drama pictures Liu’s ‘feminine self-sacrifice’ as ‘the grounds upon which nation-ness is rearticulated’. This gendered framing renders the female protagonist a sign of ‘Woman [that] represents the Chinese nation’ and makes her personal, domestic ‘destiny … an allegory of China’s embattled sense of itself as a nation, of what it stands for and whom it stands with’. Ultimately, Rofel argues that the televisual representations of women’s love and marriage in *Yearnings* delineate ‘the ideal womanhood of Chinese masculine fantasies’ in a drastically changing time.

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130 Xiao, *Family Revolution*, p. 132.
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid., p. 712.
In another neoliberal critique dedicated to the gendered representations of love in post-1990 Chinese literary and televisual narratives, Xiao illustrates that in responding to China’s ‘expanding neoliberal economy and revived patriarchy’, love has been reimagined as a learned ‘capacity’ (nengli) for women in heterosexual relationships. As Xiao further explicates, since the 1990s, Chinese televisual representations of love and marriage indicate that ‘the converging forces of a transnational middle-class culture and an indigenous “harmonious society” campaign [have been working] towards reshaping women’s role to be the administrator of domestic consumption as well as the repository of romanticized “traditional feminine virtues”’. In particular, post-2000 Chinese TV dramas often present a heteropatriarchal marital discourse in which ‘loveable’ women need to obtain both cosmopolitan and traditional virtuous feminine qualities through constant self-discipline, -management and -transformation of their own bodies and domestic lifestyles.

In addition, research on contemporary Chinese televisual representations of transnational romance and marriage also finds that China’s heteropatriarchal-structured nationalism is often expressed through televisual imaginations about cross-racial, transnational heterosexual relationships. In this kind of televisual romance, Chinese manhood is framed as sexually appealing to non-Chinese, often Anglophone Caucasian, women. For instance, Kathleen Erwin’s study on the Chinese melodramatic images of transnational marriages between Chinese men and Caucasian women in the 1990s reveals that this type of drama takes on an Occidentalist, misogynistic gaze. Through this gaze, white women in the dramas replace Chinese women to serve as ‘the object of Chinese male desire’. In doing this, the dramas

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136 Ibid., p. 752.
137 Ibid., pp. 735-37.
139 Ibid., p. 238.
suggest that the Chinese nation is ‘masculine and (sexually) desirable’ in the transnational landscape of the 1990s.\textsuperscript{140}

This point is further articulated in Chinese media scholars Sheldon H. Lu’s and Geng Song’s research on Chinese visual culture. As Lu points out, the 1990s’ Chinese soap operas often present a ‘transnational male imaginary’.\textsuperscript{141} To reassert nationalism and manhood in a global age, the dramas often foreground

the (imaginary) central position of Chinese men in relations to women … The centrality of Chinese men is established, confirmed, and reconfirmed as they are positioned as the owners of power and capital. Foreign women are the ‘subalterns’, subject to the men’s gaze and desire.\textsuperscript{142}

This is especially the case when portraying white women. Lu observes that there is undeniably a marginalization of the local Chinese woman in favor of the white woman in the racial, transnational politics of Chinese men, whose desire and gaze motivate the flow of the respective narrative. The foregrounding of white female sexuality is a symptom of an insecure male subjectivity. The imaginary conquest of the white woman is a male defense mechanism, an attempt to do away once and for all with the stereotype and self-perception of inadequate Asian/Chinese masculinity and sexuality.\textsuperscript{143}

Song’s study on post-2000 Chinese melodramatic portrayals of transnational romance expands Lu’s view that ‘the resexualization of Chinese masculinity through the white woman on prime-time national TV in mainland China is a significant development in the self-imagining of China’.\textsuperscript{144} Song looks at how cosmopolitanism takes a crucial role in these sexist, patriarchal televisual images that aim to assert an intertwined nationalism and Occidentalism.\textsuperscript{145} As he demonstrates, in the dramas, ‘the beautiful and powerful foreign women … are represented as bodily existences to be tamed and conquered by Chinese men’.\textsuperscript{146} Under this logic, the dramas present an ideally gendered (or

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{140} Ibid., p. 238; and Rofel, \textit{Desiring China}, p. 130.
\bibitem{141} Lu, ‘Soap Opera in China’, p. 29.
\bibitem{142} Ibid., p. 34.
\bibitem{143} Ibid., p. 40.
\bibitem{144} Ibid., p. 42.
\bibitem{146} Ibid., p. 118.
\end{thebibliography}
masculinised) image of China as developed, civilised, powerful and attractive in the global arena.\textsuperscript{147} Inspired by Song’s analysis, my case study of the interethnic, cross-cultural performances in the celebrity impersonation show \textit{Your Face Sounds Familiar} in Chapter Four reveals a similar process enacted by ethnic-Chinese cis-female performers. In this gendered process, impersonated, hypobolic images of Caucasian women, rather than serving as a sign of cosmopolitanism, represented uncivilised non-Chinese cultures and thus became a foil to the elegance and generosity of Chinese women in the show that ultimately symbolised China’s modernity and civility in a transnational context.

Besides, it should be emphasised that although the focus of my research in this thesis is primarily on variety TV genres and formats, some popular Chinese TV dramas in recent years were also adapted from global TV formats. One notable example is the Chinese version of \textit{Ugly Betty} (\textit{Yo soy Betty}, RCN, Columbia, 1999-2001), \textit{Ugly Wudi} (\textit{Chounü Wudi}, Hunan TV, China, 2008-2010). As recorded in Xiaoxiao Zhang and Anthony Fung’s research, \textit{Ugly Betty}, a global teledramatic format narrating ‘a modern tale of how an ordinary and somewhat unattractive girl achieves happiness in love and success in her career’, has been adapted more than 38 times since the 1990s.\textsuperscript{148} Its Chinese version carefully reconfigured the original format to accommodate local taste and was well received by the local audience.\textsuperscript{149} In another study, Anthony Fung and Xiaoxiao Zhang argue that this local popularity of \textit{Ugly Wudi} can be attributed to the drama’s ‘western-imported “revolutionary” theme’ and its promotion of ‘a new [non-Chinese] sense of femininity that goes beyond the conventional standards of beauty’.\textsuperscript{150} Comparing \textit{Ugly Wudi} with the most popular adapted version produced in the

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
US, *Ugly Betty* (ABC, USA, 2006-2010), Zhang and Fung further explicate that the Chinese drama ‘represents a form of cultural hybridization that modified some indicators of western modernity and presented a new form of local modernity’.\(^{151}\) They argue that to achieve this goal, *Ugly Wudi*’s Chinese producers identified ‘potentially contradictory ideology with regard to [local] state and social ideology’ and ‘chose to retain some appealing and yet sensitive narratives … by converting them to some socially and politically acceptable narratives’, while omitting other sociocultural elements and motifs that are considered too ‘radical’.\(^{152}\) Particularly, during the glocalisation of the *Ugly Betty* formulas, the modern conceptualisation of women’s (inner) beauty was highlighted in *Ugly Wudi*, yet taboo narratives ‘pertinent to ethnicity, visibility and sexuality’ were completely removed.\(^{153}\) Moreover, as Fang and Zhang find, the Chinese adaptation’s ‘un-feminine heroine saves the charming prince’ trope ‘empowers females by signifying that a kind-hearted girl can still obtain true love and happiness, even if she is not deemed attractive by … Chinese conventional wisdom’.\(^{154}\) By so doing, the revised female representations of *Ugly Wudi* not only promote the party-state’s neoliberal mentality——‘meritocracy, namely capability and hard work, produces success regardless of personal background’,\(^{155}\) but also help the show to reach ‘a delicate balance between ideology and profit’.\(^{156}\) In this sense, this glocalised format of *Ugly Wudi* and its local success showcase how revised, politicised representations of female gender and sexuality function as a productive tool to resolve the social-political, economic and ideological contradictions between the drama’s original narrative conversions and its Chinese adaptation.

These aforementioned scholarly discussions unveil the ways in which women represented in Chinese melodramas have remained ‘national’ and ‘politicised’, often under the narrative frameworks of (either local or

\(^{151}\) Zhang and Fung, ‘TV Formatting’, p. 510. Also see, Ibid.
\(^{152}\) Ibid., pp. 510-513.
\(^{153}\) Ibid., p. 508.
transnational) love, romance and marriage. Although the examples examined above are of heterosexual women, they exemplify how global cultures, either in the form of global TV flows or as stereotypical images of foreign Other, can be creatively appropriated and incorporated into local TV productions and speak to China’s historical and social-political particulars. During this process, televisual imaginaries of female gender, sexuality, body and desire have been persistently exploited as a foil to modernise, masculinise and globalise China. My discussions in the next subsection and in Chapter Two (on the heteronormative, cosmopolitan persona of the Chinese transsexual talk show host) will further uncover that the often heteronormatively framed ‘national’ cultural specificities and queer female images on TV are in fact symbiotic and mutually constitutive of each other.

5.2. Queer female images in contemporary China

Similar to the broader representations of women in modern Chinese history, female images on contemporary Chinese TV have always been queer in essence, although this is often manifest in subtle, negotiative and compromising ways. Although it is hard to trace the very first queer female image that appeared on Chinese TV, some notable cases can be identified. Take, for example, the male-to-female cross-dressing ‘servant girl’ Da Meizi in the historical drama *Xuèse Canyang* (Beijing Youshi Cultural Diffusion Limited Company, China, 2005) which portrays a story of pre-1949’s modern China (fig. 1.2). Other examples include the homoerotic and homosocial scenes, connotations and storylines in recent cyber Chinese TV dramas, variety and talk shows, such as the comedy *Go Princess Go* released online, which presents a time-traveling, gender-reversal story (*Taizifei Shengzhiji*; LeTV, China, 2015; fig. 1.3) and the web talk show *You Can You Bibi* (*Qi Pa Shuo*; iQiyi, China, 2014–present; fig. 1.4) which features many openly gay and lesbian participants some of whom are queer icons in Chinese-speaking societies. Contemporary Chinese reality TV shows also contain a surprisingly large number of transgender images and public figures. Notable examples include the gender-nonnormative female idol Li Yuchun in the 2005 season of the singing competition *Super Voice Girl* (fig. 1.5), and the tomboyish female guest Xie Jia of the heterosexual dating (xiangqin) show *If You Are*
*the One* (fig. 1.6; Zhejiang Satellite TV, China, 2010-present), who drew much attention for her 2010 appearance on the show.

Figure 1.2: A screen capture from the drama *Xuese Canyang*, showing the servant girl (on the right) chatting with her mistress, the concubine of a rich man in the Republic of China (1912-1949). The story gradually reveals that the servant girl was the concubine’s childhood sweetheart. Since he could not allow his lover to marry the rich man alone, he decided to cross-dress as his lover’s servant girl and accompany her to the rich man’s family. He then lived with the concubine and passed as a woman for decades.

Figure 1.3: A screen capture from the web drama *Go Princess Go*, which tells the story of a heterosexual man who travelled back to ancient China and woke up in a princess’s body. At first, the time-traveling man (living in the biologically female body of the princess) constantly flirts with his servant girls and with the prince’s other concubines, as shown in the picture. However, he gradually falls in love with the prince who is attracted by the princess’s (the time-traveling man’s) female masculinity.
Figure 1.4: A screen capture from the popular online Chinese talk show *You Can You Bibi*. The show features the openly gay celebrity host Kevin Tsai from Taiwan (on the right), as well as a number of gender-nonnormative participants who compete for the ‘talk king’ title during every season. Some of the gender-nonnormative participants were openly gay men or queer icons online before their appearance in the show. The effeminate personas of some gay male participants often served as a selling point for the show and were constantly joked about by the hosts and other participants.

Figure 1.5: A picture of the tomboyish female celebrity Li Yuchun when she participated in the 2005 *Super Voice Girl*. As I discuss in Chapter Three, the show had been famous for over a decade for its high profiling of tomboyish participants and female same-sex intimacies.
Heavily shaped by modern Chinese gender and feminist cultures, which I have briefly discussed above, this queer-tinted TV culture in post-2000 China can also be traced back to literary and public cultural traditions in the imperial period. A body of scholarship on historical Chinese female homoeroticism and homosociality has recorded queer female appearances in public life, fiction and folkares. For instance, studies reveal that the gendered dichotomy of *yin-yang* (meaning shaded-bright) in Daoism is embodied by female characters in classic Chinese fiction, such as the ones in *The Story of the Stone* (*Hong Lou Meng*) written by Cao Xueqin in the mid-18th century, and in the premodern popular imaginaries of heroines, such as the legendary female-to-male cross-dressing warrior Hua Mulan in the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420AD—589AD) and the feminist writer Qiu Jin in the Qing Dynasty (figs. 1.7 and 1.8).  

Figure 1.7: An online-circulated montage of posters showing images of Hua Mulan in recent films and TV dramas. Hua was known for her bravery in cross-dressing as a male soldier in order to serve in the military for her father who was too old to survive as a warrior. As legend has it, Hua’s military comrades did not realise that she was a cis female until she revealed herself after the war ended. Her cross-dressing is applauded in folklore as an expression of filial piety.

Figure 1.8: A historical picture (from China’s Archive Resource Website) of the Chinese feminist Qiu Jin (1875-1907) in a Western-style male suit. It was rumoured that Qiu Jin was a lesbian, although she was married to a man and gave birth to two children. Yet, her gender- and perhaps sexual-nonnormative identities have been interpreted as an expression of
nationalism and a feminist protest against the patriarchal, conservative Qing Dynasty.

Contemporary queer female images on Chinese TV often reference historical specificities and actively mediate and fuse elements of both local and global female gender cultures. In Chapter Three of this thesis, I explore tomboyish female stardom in reality singing competitions and briefly speculate on how and why some possibly gay and lesbian TV personalities have evaded media censorship and risen to stardom through their roles in online Chinese TV programmes and movies. Yet, in the following section, it is worthwhile to discuss the tomboyish female guests in the popular reality dating show *If You Are the One* (*IYATO* hereafter). The show epitomises the logic of contemporary China’s queer sensationalism discussed in the introductory chapter. As my reading of the queer dimension of *IYATO* illustrates, the popularity of tomboyish, single women in a heterosexual matchmaking show demonstrates the complex ways in which queer female images are manipulated and compromised, yet also actively negotiate with and dismantle, the dominant heteropatriarchal cultural discourse.

### 5.3. ‘Handsome’ women in the Chinese dating game show *IYATO*

The format of *IYATO* is largely based on the Australian dating game programme, *Taken Out* (Network Ten, 2008–2009; fig. 1.9).158 Produced by Jiangsu Satellite TV and premiered on 15 January, 2010, *IYATO* is a Saturday night prime-time TV programme.159 Each episode of the show features the male host, Meng Fei, and one or two invited discussants, as well as 24 single women standing on the stage, waiting for a bachelor to walk onto the stage and select his ‘love at first sight’ (*xindong nüsheng*) (fig. 1.10). The female guests ask the bachelor brief questions and provide short commentaries on

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158 According to Keane and Liu’s research on TV formats in China, the dating show is in fact ‘the first category to be widely imitated’ when TV formats gained popularity in Mainland China. There was a Chinese ‘TV dating craze’ in the late 1990s. Yet, the first dating TV format copied by Chinese TV stations was from another Chinese-speaking society, Taiwan. See Keane and Liu, ‘Independent Television Production’, pp. 247-248. Besides, the format of the Australian show, *Taken Out*, was also adapted in the UK to produce the popular British dating show, *Take Me Out* (ITV, UK, 2010-present).

159 The show was originally aired weekly on both Saturdays and Sundays. Yet starting in January 2015, the show has been aired on Saturday nights only. Starting in 2013, it has also been aired by the Australian digital TV channel, SBS 2 (later changed its name to SBS Viceland in 2017).
their first impressions on the bachelor. Next, three short videos featuring monologues/dialogues by the bachelor, his friends, family members and/or colleagues are played on the big screens in the studio. The content of each of the videos usually comprises a self-introduction, past romantic experiences, career, family, and educational backgrounds, and his views on family, romance and marriage. Following each video, a round of conversation, questions and sometimes debates too are conducted between the bachelor, some of the female guests, the host and the discussant(s). For the course of the entire process, each female guest is able to turn off a light on the podium in front of her, if she has lost interest in knowing more about this bachelor. If the bachelor no longer has a light burning on the stage, he is eliminated from the matchmaking. The next bachelor then walks to the centre of the stage to start the next round of matchmaking. If a bachelor still has lights lit for him once all the videos have finished playing, the show enters a ‘power reversal’ segment (quanli fanzhuan huanjie). In this segment, the bachelor can select one female guest from the ones who have left a light on for him and ask her to stand next to his ‘love at the first sight’. He can choose one from a set of questions listed on the screen to ask each guest. After listening to the answers of each, the bachelor can decide which of the two women he would like to leave the stage with. However, if his ‘love at the first sight’ has already turned off her light before the final ‘power reversal’ segment, she is allowed to reject his courting in the end. Each episode runs for 90 minutes and usually presents the matchmaking processes of five bachelors.

Figure 1.9: The logo of the show IYATO and its (male) host Meng Fei. Besides mediating the matchmaking, Meng also often provides advice to
the bachelor and the female participants on their dating and romantic conversation skills.

Figure 1.10: A moment in the show *IYATO* from 163.com, showing a group of female guests on stage. The numbers on the screen indicate how many of the women are still interested in the bachelor.

Perhaps due to this innovative style, *IYATO* achieved considerable rating success right after its premiere, with a record-breaking number of viewers, above 50 million, for the first half of 2010. It simultaneously attracted a great deal of scholarly attention because of its navigation of a gendered televisual discourse. For instance, Chinese media scholar Wanning Sun has explored the show’s ‘self-making’ and ‘self-globalizing’ aspects. Sun’s research finds that this formatted dating show, facilitated by the liberalisation and globalisation of contemporary China’s provincial TV industry, aims to ease the intersectional struggles of Chinese people that result from gender inequality and the growing gap between rich and poor. Rather than offering any direct critique of the acute problems rooted in local political and economic systems, *IYATO* shifts the focus and delivers information to educate the audience on how to train themselves to become ‘desirable’ citizens who are capable of entering ‘good marriage’, sustaining high-quality romance and building stable heterosexual families in a neoliberal China.

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162 Ibid.
This is particularly evident in the materialistically themed conversations between the female guests and the bachelors on the show. Moreover, as Sun illustrates, some of the materialistic, misogynistic opinions on marriage and family revealed on the show ‘actually accentuate class tensions’ (emphasis in original) that have intensified in contemporary China.\textsuperscript{163} Yet, this function of the show—provoking the anger, and even protest, of the general public towards China’s severe social stratification—has met with response from the party-state and has led to several rounds of official regulations and criticism of \textit{IYATO}.\textsuperscript{164}

Following Sun’s research, another study by Luzhou Li presents a neoliberal critique of \textit{IYATO} through a feminist lens.\textsuperscript{165} Li agrees that \textit{IYATO} emphasises young single women’s materialistic expectations regarding marriage, such as the ones idealising bachelors with a high income, high educational level and cosmopolitan experiences. Moreover, as Li critiques, the show represents women as socially and economically dependent on men and encourages women to sexualise and hyperfeminise themselves for ‘the male gaze’ of the host, the discussants and the viewers.\textsuperscript{166} That is, in the guise of free choice regarding love and marriage, this type of heterosexual romance-focused dating game programme serves as a neoliberal cultural venue for legitimising the subordination of women through ‘the collusion between commercialism and patriarchy’ in post-2010 China.\textsuperscript{167}

Diverging from the analytical approach of these two studies, Pan Wang’s more recent study of \textit{IYATO} traces the genealogy of matchmaking programmes since the late 1980s.\textsuperscript{168} Wang’s study shows that although it employs a global TV format, \textit{IYATO} constantly draws on and then reconfigures local Chinese matchmaking TV culture and traditional familial-

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., p. 532.
marital ideals in its seemingly new format and content. In so doing, the programme forms part of a sophisticated, contentious Chinese participatory TV culture in an age of globalisation and digitisation. On the one hand, this new TV culture invites viewers’ subjective opinions on the gendered and class-based issues of the selection process. On the other, this new TV culture is manufactured by means of a hybrid media-cultural format, which ‘juxtaposes traditional, anti-traditional, and modern ideas and values, highlighting China’s nostalgia for the past and its growing cosmopolitan identity’ in the intersecting discourses on marriage, love and family.

As exemplified by the abovementioned studies, one of the foremost aspects of the show that has been criticised is its tendency to persuade women to self-transform into a more marriageable, traditionally feminine type of wife and mother. Nevertheless, what is missing from the academic treatment is a consideration of how gender and sexual non-normativities have contributed to the success of the show. Notable in this regard is the fact that, over the years, the show has promoted a number of tomboyish female guests who were labelled ‘most handsome female No. 1’ (zuimei nü yihao) as they have often been arranged as the first female guest of the twenty-four on stage. Some famous ‘most handsome female No. 1’ guests are Li Huanyi (fig. 1.11) and Chen Yuan (fig. 1.12), as well as the aforementioned Xie Jia.

Figure 1.11: A screen capture of one of the most famous tomboyish female guests, Li Huanyi, in the 2014 season of IYATO. She was also

169 Ibid.
170 Ibid., p. 516.
named as ‘the most beautiful/handsome No. 1 female guest’ by the host Meng Fei.

Two of the famous tomboyish guests, Xie and Li, eventually found their matches after several months of searching on the show. Some others, such as Chen, did not find a suitable bachelor and quit the show after weeks or months of participation. Interestingly, these gender-nonnormative women on the show often emphasise that their ideal partner-type is a man who is more handsome and masculine than themselves. Some tomboyish guests also explained their gender nonnormativity as being an indicator of their personal style, or a result of past experience, which could yet be changed for their true (heterosexual) love.

For example, one of the most famous tomboyish guests on the show, Li, first appeared on *IYATO* in June 2014, with short hair and wearing androgynous-style clothes, which differentiated her from the other hyper-feminine female guests on stage. Soon, she became well-known for her tomboyish yet beautiful looks and gained a large number of female followers online. During public interviews and on the show, Li repeatedly stated that her androgyny is a result of the divorce of her parents and the absence of a father.

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figure in her childhood.\textsuperscript{172} Moreover, Li often referred to a traditional Chinese saying that emerged during the Warring States period (476–221BC)—‘a woman grooms for her lover’ (nǚ wei yuejizhe rong)—and claimed that for the man whom she truly loves, she would be willing to grow her hair longer.\textsuperscript{173} Li was on the show for four months and eventually left the stage with a bachelor who had participated in \textit{IYATO} only for her on 11 October 2014 (fig. 1.13).\textsuperscript{174} The bachelor is a hyper-masculine fitness trainer who previously was a professional athlete. After he walked onto the stage, he chose Li as his ‘love at the first sight’ and gave her the special gifts he had carefully selected and prepared—a hyper-feminine dress and a pair of high heels. The bachelor told Li that he hoped she would accept his love and looked forward to seeing her transformation into a cute, feminine, little woman for him. After hearing his courting, Li cried out and responded that, ‘Actually, it is very difficult to find the right person [as partner]. I liked other people before. I know this kind of feeling. I [am willing to] walk down the stage with you’.\textsuperscript{175} Before she left the studio with the bachelor, every other feminine female guest onstage burst into tears for her. Li’s successful matchmaking after serving as a regular guest on the show for a fairly lengthy period caused a sensation among the viewers and received a great deal of media coverage at the time.\textsuperscript{176}

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\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid.
\end{small}
Interestingly, this was not the first time the show had presented such a sensational scene concerning a tomboyish guest. As early as in its first season, in 2010, the tomboyish guest Xie, who was only twenty-two years old, stayed on the show for four months before she found a match. During her appearance on *IYATO*, Xie constantly explained her gender nonnormativity as a reflection of her gendered immaturity, especially relative to other hyper-feminine guests who, according to Xie, were already mature women and knew how to present their feminine self well in public.¹⁷⁷ More dramatically, after Xie had been a regular guest on the show for several weeks, a lesbian rumour about her erupted in February 2010, caused by the widespread online circulation of old intimate pictures of her with her female ‘best friends’ in college.¹⁷⁸ In response, during public interviews, Xie immediately acknowledged her previous openly out lesbian identity and ‘lesbian past’.¹⁷⁹ Yet, she claimed that before she turned 21, she had not been psychologically mature enough to realise that she was a ‘girl’. Therefore, she was not able to figure out what gender role she could perform in life. When she turned 22 in 2010, she

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¹⁷⁹ Ibid.
decided to participate in *IYATO* because she had matured and wanted to seek an authentic, pure love.\textsuperscript{180} Despite the rampant rumour of her being lesbian, there were a number of bachelors courting Xie onstage. Eventually, in the episode on 12 June 2010, a bachelor from Hong Kong claimed that he liked tomboyish girls and told Xie that he knew about her past and did not care.\textsuperscript{181} Xie responded that she had no reason to reject true love, and accepted the bachelor’s courting (fig. 1.14).\textsuperscript{182}

*Figure 1.14: A photograph from 163.com of the media interview of Xie (on the right) and her *IYATO* match after they left the stage together on 12 June 2010.*

While both the famous tomboyish guests successfully obtained male matches on the show, they soon broke up with the bachelors for similar reasons: the men’s life goals and pursuits were quite different from theirs. What further complicates this intriguing tomboyish representation on a heterosexual matchmaking show is the censoring of a similar matchmaking segment involving a famous lesbian icon during the live broadcast of an annual Chinese entertainment industry ceremony in 2011.

In early 2010, as revealed and gossiped about by anonymous netizens, Xie was one of the few famous online tomboy lesbian icons who studied at the Beijing Contemporary Music Academy.\textsuperscript{183} Some of Xie’s pictures with her

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{181} ‘*IYATO*’s Xie Jia Got the One’, accessed 31 July 2018.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{183} See http://news.cri.cn/gb/27564/2010/05/27/1326s2865377.htm.
lesbian friends were also widely circulated in Chinese cyberspace at the time (fig. 1.15). Moreover, Xie was also rumoured to have participated in the preliminary selection of *IYATO* with her girlfriend.\textsuperscript{184} According to online gossip, their participation in *IYATO* aimed to show their family members that they had already turned ‘straight’.\textsuperscript{185} Yet, the rumours were never confirmed nor explicitly denied by Xie. Later, in early 2011, Xie’s tomboy lesbian friend and fellow student at the Music Academy, Huangfu Shenghua, was invited by Hunan TV station to participate in the special edition of *IYATO* presented live at an annual award ceremony, known as the Baidu Entertainment Boiling Point (*Baidu Yuele Feidian*). Huangfu was a high-profile lesbian icon in Chinese cyberspace in the 2000s, mostly for her close resemblance to the famous Hong Kong male celebrity Edison Koon-hei Chen (fig. 1.16). Huangfu has been quite active in sharing online intimate pictures of her with her girlfriend Xu Wen, who is also an openly out lesbian celebrity well-known to Chinese netizens. In 2010 and 2011, Huangfu’s online fame started drawing the interest of a number of entertainment agency companies and TV stations. She was often invited to participate in provincial-station-produced variety shows and media interviews about her unique ‘fashion style’ and online fame.\textsuperscript{186} Her appearance in the ceremony in January 2011 also attracted considerable media and fan attention.

\textsuperscript{184} See [http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-funinfo-1957786-1.shtml](http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-funinfo-1957786-1.shtml)
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{186} See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0RTrXcdRcO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0RTrXcdRcO).
Figure 1.15: A photograph widely circulated online showing a group of Beijing lesbian cyber celebrities. On the right is the tomboyish *IYATO* guest, Xie Jia. Second from the right is Xie’s friend, the online lesbian icon Huangfu Shenghua, who is well known for her strong resemblance to the Hong Kong male celebrity Edison Koon-hei Chen.

Figure 1.16: A photograph from the Chinese-language gay website, Danlan.org, comparing the looks of the lesbian icon Huangfu (on the left) and the male celebrity Edison Koon-hei Chen (on the right).

The ceremony was held on 15 January 2011 in Beijing. The special segment was a staged, mini heterosexual-matchmaking performance and took a similar format of *IYATO*. It was hosted by the openly out Taiwanese gay celebrity, Kevin Tsai, and lasted for twenty minutes. In the segment, 12 single female
cyber celebrities were invited onto the stage, including Huangfu, who just walked the ceremonial red carpet with her girlfriend. The bachelor was played by the original *IYATO* show’s host, Meng Fei, which reveals the playful nature of this segment. Nevertheless, the segment was censored and removed from the live broadcast of the ceremony. Parts of the rehearsal had been recorded by the audience in the studio and were later shared online.\(^{187}\)

As shown in my discourse analysis of the tomboyish guests’ appearances in public spaces and on the heterosexual dating show, some of these guests had already come out online or been well-known lesbian celebrities in Chinese cyberspace before they participated in the show. The self-‘straightening’ or ‘normalising’ of their onstage heterosexuality and female masculinity constantly draws on local gendered cultures and traditions (e.g., the ‘No.1 handsome female guest’ Li’s use of traditional Chinese sayings to convince the audience of her heterosexual femininity; and some other tomboyish guests’ referring to their female masculinity as an immature, personal style instead of a sign of nonnormative female sexuality). This mainstream heterosexual media’s combined capitalisation and gendered regulation of young, gender-non normative women epitomises the culture of a dreadful normative society that manipulates and prescribes women’s gender and sexuality within a hetero-patriarchal gender/sex system.

Furthermore, the sensational narrative of the tomboyish lesbian leaving the show with her ‘true love’, accompanied by the crying of other hyper-feminine guests onstage, can be read as an allegory on TV. It pictures a cruel reality in which tomboyish women are singled out for their female masculinity as media spectacles and fantasies, yet eventually have to merge themselves into a heterosexual real world as traditionally feminine women (achieved metaphorically by walking downstage). Meanwhile, reading this scene through the queer lens suggested by Heather Love, this mainstream televisual discourse on a used-to-be queer girl who eventually walked into a heteronormative world can also be deemed a presentation of queer ‘feelings

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\(^{187}\) See the rehearsal recorded by the audience at: http://baishi.baidu.com/watch/8551036649893682729.html
such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, ressentiment, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness [that] are tied to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical “impossibility” of same-sex desire’ (emphasis in original). As Love argues in her 2007 book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*,

> Queers face a strange choice: is it better to move on toward a brighter future or to hang back and cling to the past? Such divided allegiances result in contradictory feelings: pride and shame, anticipation and regret, hope and despair. Contemporary queers find ourselves in the odd situation of ‘looking forward’ while we are ‘feeling backward’.

Problematising the negative meanings, such as signifying a repressive, illiberal, homophobic past, assigned to these ‘backward feelings’—shame, depression, and regret’, Love encourages her readers to focus on this form of ‘queer backwardness’ and its power to reveal the fact that ‘the history of queer damage retains its capacity to do harm in the [post-Stonewall American] present’.

Ironically, situated in the heterosexual sociocultural environment of contemporary China, the show’s representation of gender-nonnormative young women’s heterosexual transformation both suggests a queer, nostalgic longing for the premature, pre-heterosexual, shameful (thus ‘backward’ and ‘expired’) past—‘a way of clinging to a broken and outdated dream’ of being a queer girl—and ‘makes visible the damage that [Chinese adult women] live with in the present’.

In this sense, it can even be read as a caricature of ‘a history of suffering, stigma and violence’ experienced by and escaped from by gender-nonnormative Chinese women in order to survive in a modern, adult, hetero-patriarchal society.

Besides, the entire process of showing a (previously self-identified) lesbian female who was able to market herself in a heterosexual culture and had a number of self-proclaimed heterosexual (and even hyper-masculine) male pursuers not only reveals the fluidity and performativity of gender and sexuality, but also disrupts the naturalised and idealised internal coherence of

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189 Ibid., p. 27.
190 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
191 Ibid., p. 149; p. 29.
192 Ibid., p. 27.
gender, sexuality and desire. In this sense, these images of queer women on a dating show exemplify a queer-sensationalist pop culture in post-2000 China. It cashes in on ‘handsome’ women who actively negotiate with normative media and society, yet eventually pushes onscreen queer women back to a heterosexual familial and marital system. In the following chapters, I further explore the diverse ways in which global TV formats help form effective venues for promoting this queer-sensationalist culture. However, in the final section of this chapter, my investigation of Chinese media censorship systems as they concern LGBTQ content provides a glimpse of how and why certain queerly loaded media figures and celebrities can survive in a structurally heteronormative, highly commercialised media industry, while others are constantly censored or cracked down on.

6. Media censorship in an emerging queer pop

As was briefly discussed at the beginning of this chapter, China’s media censorship system and regulations have contributed significantly to the development and transformation of provincial station-produced programmes adapted from global TV formats. Meanwhile, Chinese media and cultural policies concerning same-sex intimacy have also contributed to the commercialisation of queer female images in the contemporary Chinese TV industry, albeit indirectly.

Notably, following China’s decriminalisation and depathologisation of homosexuality in 1997 and 2001, respectively, the government has shown an ambiguous attitude and claimed that it does not encourage, discourage and promote LGBTQ culture. Since 2008, official media policies have deemed homosexual content ‘abnormal’ and ‘perverted’. Some official guidelines directly associated homosexuality with ‘pornography, sex, and vulgarisms’ and claimed that it should be excluded from Chinese mass media. Since 2000, LGBTQ film festivals and communicative platforms, as well as fan sites dedicated to same-sex fantasies, have been subject to periodic


194 Ibid.
crackdowns.\textsuperscript{195} In the post-2000 years, China’s media censorship system have undergone a series of structural changes, and official policies regarding homosexuality in mass media have been regularly revised. To date, however, explicit portrayals of homosexual topics are generally either censored or carefully regulated in official, legal, educational and media discourses.\textsuperscript{196}

For example, in 2016, the SAPPRFT issued a set of new stipulations expressing unequivocal disapproval of media materials that ‘express or display abnormal sexual relations or sexual behavior, such as incest, homosexuality, perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual violence’ or ‘promote unhealthy views of marriage and relationships, including extramarital affairs, one-night stands, and sexual freedom’.\textsuperscript{197} One notable censorship case is that of the 2016 popular online gay-themed TV drama, \textit{Addicted} (\textit{Shangyin}; iQiyi, China, 2016; fig. 1.17). The show, also known as \textit{Heroin}, was about a high-school gay romance. It premiered on 29 January 2016 and was removed from all the video-streaming sites before the online distribution of its final three episodes in late February 2016. It was pulled off the air for its portrayals of homosexuality and was accused of promoting ‘vulgar, immoral, and unhealthy content’ and ‘the dark side of society’.\textsuperscript{198} The two main actors who played a gay couple in the series were also banned from the Chinese TV screen.\textsuperscript{199}

Figure 1.17: A poster of the Chinese gay-themed web series *Addicted*. The two young main actors featured in the drama later were also banned from appearing on TV.

Chinese media scholar Shaohua Guo finds that in response to the state’s practising of ‘morality’ regulation, media producers and directors often ‘embrac[e] resilience’ and pragmatically tailor ways of media production and distribution.\(^{200}\) For instance, Chinese independent filmmakers often use social networks and video-streaming sites to circulate LGBTQ-themed documentaries.\(^{201}\) Additionally, the ambiguous attitudes, inconsistent structures and ‘generative’ (instead of repressive) regulatory practices of Chinese official censorship systems often lead to self-censoring not only by celebrities, netizens, the grassroots public and LGBTQ-identified media practitioners but also by mainstream media producers and communicative platforms.\(^{202}\) Therefore, China’s media regulations concerning LGBTQ representations cannot be simply described as either ‘repressive’ or ‘liberal’. Instead, the practice of ‘self-censorship’ and the ‘political-ideological


\(^{201}\) Shaw and Zhang, ‘Cyberspace and Gay Rights’, p. 285.

\(^{202}\) Ho, *Gay and Lesbian Subculture*; Amar, ‘“Ni You Freestyle Me?”’; and Ng, ‘Rethinking Censorship in China’, pp. 87-103.
manipulation of LGBT culture’ in China’s ‘panoptic’ censorship system both online and offline, where the general public ‘can be watched without them noticing, and are led to behave properly by their awareness and fear of the potential constant surveillance’, are often apparent and entangled in the censoring of and hostility toward homosexuality in Chinese media cultures.

Take, for example, the most recent wave of crackdowns on LGBTQ content in cyberspace and on TV during April and May 2018. As part of an effort to build a harmonious online community, the most widely used Chinese social media platform, Sina Weibo announced a three-month ban on online content related to homosexuality on 14 April 2018. Following a public protest against this ban on 15 April 2018, the party-state’s media outlet, the People’s Daily published commentary in its online forum ‘Strong Nation Community’ (Qiangguo Shequ), criticising the misunderstanding and disrespect suffered by homosexual people as a result of cyber censorship. In response to this official criticism, Weibo quickly revoked its purging of homosexual content.

Weibo’s online homosexual purge can be regarded as an example of ‘the self-censoring acts’ of website managers and administrators. However, the People’s Daily’s commentary hardly signals a LGBTQ-supportive, queer-friendly attitude in official discourse. In fact, as the mouthpiece of the party-

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203 ‘Panopticon’ was a term originally coined by Jeremy Bentham in 1791 and later developed by Michel Foucault to describe a prison architecture ‘where the inmates are being watched by an invisible guard’. For a discussion on the term’s genealogy and application in the understanding of Chinese cyber culture and censorship, see Tsui, ‘The Panopticon as the Antithesis’, p. 66. For Foucault’s discussion of the term, see Foucault, Discipline and Punish, pp. 195-230.

204 Tsui, ‘The Panopticon as the Antithesis’, p. 67.

205 Zhao, ‘Censoring “Rainbow”’.


208 See https://www.whatsonweibo.com/weibo-administration-were-no-longer-targeting-gay-content/
state, the *People’s Daily*’s commentary, while acknowledging that ‘homosexuality is not a mental disorder’, criticises Weibo’s ban for causing public anxiety and advises homosexual people to be self-disciplined and to behave like socially responsible, normal Chinese citizens. Viewed from this angle, this official response appears to be more concerned with maintaining China’s social-political stability in a neoliberal discourse than with moving toward gender and sexual equality. This intention of the official media outlet to alleviate social disharmony was further confirmed in another official media regulatory memo circulated internally in June 2018. The memo clarifies the attitude of official censors toward LGBTQ culture in stating that, in order to create an ideologically positive, politically correct media environment, the ‘self-censorship’ of media producers is encouraged and ‘homosexuality is respected, but gay-themed content or gay characters are not allowed’ in mass media.209

Moreover, on 9 May 2018, during China’s airing of the long-running *Eurovision Song Contest* (EBU, EU, 1956-present; *Eurovision* hereafter), scenes featuring a gay romance and a tattooed singer were cut out, and images of the LGBT pride symbol—a rainbow flag—held by the live studio audience were blurred (fig. 1.18).210 Soon after, on 10 May 2018, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) banned China from airing *Eurovision* in the future, because these acts of censorship contradict EBU’s ‘values of universality and inclusivity and … proud tradition of celebrating diversity through music’.211 *Eurovision* was aired by Mango TV, the online broadcaster of China’s provincial station Hunan TV, which has been famous for importing and adapting Western and South Korean TV programmes. After EBU terminated

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211 See EBU’s public announcement online here: https://eurovision.tv/snippet/ebu-terminates-this-year-s-partnership-with-mango-tv
its broadcasting deal, Hunan TV spokesmen responded by claiming that they ‘weren’t aware’ of the censorship.\textsuperscript{212}

\begin{figure}[h!]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{censored_eurovision_scene.png}
\caption{A screen capture of the censored \textit{Eurovision} scene, shared on the gay-themed Chinese Weibo account \textit{The Voice of Tongzhi}, showing that a rainbow flag waved by a member of the live audience was blurred during post-production}
\end{figure}

In fact, it would be difficult for Hunan TV not to see \textit{Eurovision} as a queer show. While the state broadcaster CCTV broadcast \textit{Eurovision} once in 2013, Hunan TV started live-broadcasting the semi-final and final of the competition in 2015. The most sensational moment in \textit{Eurovision} in recent years was when the Austrian drag queen Conchita Wurst, who later became a global gay icon, won the show in 2014 (fig. 1.19). In the following year, the openly gay \textit{American Idol} (Fox, USA, 2002-present) singer Adam Lambert was invited to perform at the 2015 Tmall Double-11 Global Shopping Festival broadcast by Hunan TV (fig. 1.20). Additionally, in 2011, the popular talk show \textit{Day Day Up}, also broadcast by Hunan TV, featured the two main actresses from the Thai lesbian movie \textit{Yes or No} (Sarasawadee Wongsompetch, Come On Sweet, Thailand, 2010). Another Thai tomboy lesbian celebrity Phuawryne Keenan was invited to feature in one episode of

*Day Day Up* in 2012. Even in programmes currently being aired by Hunan TV and Mango TV, such as the variety music show *Come Sing with Me* (Hunan TV, China, 2016-present), queer forms of persona, gender and relationship have been proliferated and promoted. Nevertheless, in these queer representations, same-sex intimacies and gender-nonnormativities are often presented as onscreen, fictional fantasies.

![Figure 1.19: The drag queen Conchita Wurst, who won the *Eurovision* contest in May 2014, which showcases *Eurovision* as a LGBTQ friendly, queer-supportive show.](image)

![Figure 1.20: A screen capture showing the openly gay singer Adam Lambert performing at a Mainland China-based festival, which was broadcast by Hunan TV in November 2015. Most of Lambert’s performances in China were heavily queer-connotated.](image)
Numerous examples show that LGBTQ cultures cannot simply be regarded as ‘taboo in China’s entertainment industry where same-sex relationships are banned from television screens’.\(^{213}\) On the contrary, queer performances, meanings and desires have not only been visible but also constantly fashionised, commercialised, and ‘normalised’ and ‘straightened’ in mainstream entertainment.\(^{214}\) Hunan TV and Mango TV, in particular, have imported, broadcast, and capitalised on ‘politically innocuous’ queer pop, although discussions of LGBTQ identities and politics have rarely been televised on these channels.

For example, in April 2018, on Mango TV’s reality parenting show *Mamas Are Superwomen* (*Mama Shi Shaoren*; Mango TV, China, 2016-2018), the female celebrity Bao Wenjing wore a black jacket with a large rainbow pattern on the back and some rainbow-coloured strips hanging from the sleeves. The English slogan ‘Love Has No Gender’ is printed on the rainbow on the back of the jacket (figs. 1.21 and 1.22). The jacket is only one of many designs featuring the rainbow sign from the Chinese fashion brand ‘lalabobo’, which imitates the colourful Japanese Kawaii style.\(^{215}\) Although the rainbow flag is a classic symbol for the LGBTQ movement that originated in United States during the 20\(^{th}\) century,\(^{216}\) lalabobo presents the ‘rainbow’ in an inter-East Asian context as a ‘candy-girly’ style that represents hope, good mood and beautiful weather. Even though to some people, the pattern on the jacket is a (Westernised) expression of LGBTQ culture, the ‘de-politicised’ fashioning of rainbow, situated in a hyper-heteronormative programme about mother-child relationships, did not concern Mango TV as an expression of ‘negative’ meanings. Thus, the images of it remained uncensored.

\(^{213}\) Washington, ‘The European Broadcasting Union’.
\(^{215}\) See https://www.qqtn.com/health/164726_1.html
Ironically, in a game segment of the variety show *Happy Camp (Kuaile Dabenying; China, 1997-present)*, broadcast by Hunan TV on 30 December 2017, two celebrities wore a sweater showing Santa Claus holding a rainbow underneath the English word ‘Naughty’ (figs. 1.23 and 1.24). This pattern was blurred in the official version of the episode. The producers explained that the clothes had ‘unhealthy guiding patterns’. This excessive regulatory act, in contrast, is evidence of the TV station’s proactive response to a new wave of crackdowns on ‘low taste’, ‘decadent’ cultures (including tattoos,

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217 See http://www.g.com.cn/ent/42861797/
hip-hop, and cultural products that do not ‘adhere to mainstream socialist core values’) imposed by China’s state media censors in January 2018.218 An online article entitled ‘How Strong Is Mango TV’s Desire to Survive?’, published on a Chinese entertainment news website in May 2018, listed a number of Hunan TV’s and Mango TV’s unreasonable acts of self-censoring, which included blurring the faces of South Korean stars on its shows during recent Sino-Korean political conflicts.219

Figure 1.23: A screen capture showing the blurred sweater from an episode of Happy Camp broadcast on 30 December 2017

Figure 1.24: A picture circulated by netizens showing the original sweater pattern

219 See http://www.g.com.cn/ent/42861797/
Some LGBTQ-supportive netizens believe Mango TV’s censoring of homosexual content in *Eurovision* constitutes a ‘major step backwards’ in Chinese society.\(^{220}\) However, beyond conversations about progression and regression, the multifaceted marginalisation and manipulation of LGBTQ cultures on Chinese TV during a globalist age, reveals a more depressing story. Even in late into second decade of the 21\(^{st}\) century, the political energy of LGBTQ cultures, identities and activism is often distorted and attacked by homophobes as a form of transnational ‘collusion’ between domestic political saboteurs and foreign anti-China forces.\(^{221}\) Meanwhile, local and global queer currents flowing in and through the Chinese televisual space, such as androgynous celebrities, cross-dressing performances, media portrayals of homosociality, and same-sex fantasies in stardom and fandom, have been widely visible and celebrated since the early 2000s. These queer media representations and circulations do not necessarily signal a liberal, open-minded, queer-friendly media world. Instead, their political implications are ‘blurred’ and mutated, if not completely erased, so that they carry no obvious sign of threatening the often hetero-patriarchal-endorsed Chinese TV industry and society in general. This hypocritical capitalist celebration of queer images on TV points to a depressing reality in which queer pop has become a handy, profitable, yet dispensable, accessory in the burgeoning media industries against a heteronormative, authoritarian political environment. Nevertheless, it also carves out new possibilities and spaces for emerging and amplifying queer voices.

In this chapter, I have discussed the emergence and development of TV formats in China, the historical, political and cultural trajectories of public imaginaries of female gender and sexuality in contemporary televisual cultures, and the various ways in which ‘the nation’ has manifested in China’s

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\(^{220}\) See Allen, ‘Eurovision’.

\(^{221}\) See https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2018/05/%E3%80%90%E7%AB%8B%E6%AD%A4%E5%AD%98%E7%85%A7%E3%80%91%E8%AF%B7%E4%B8%8D%E8%A6%81%E5%9C%8E%E7%BD%91%E4%B8%8A%E4%BC%A0%E6%92%AD%E4%BB%A5%E4%B8%8A%E6%B6%88%E6%81%AF%E5%BC%8C%E4%B9%9F%E4%B8%8D%E8%A6%81/
TV format adaptation, reformulation and regulation. In particular, through a ‘queer-glocalist’ lens, I have examined one of the most famous formatted dating programme *IYATO* and recent censorial practices and debates on LGBTQ content on TV and in cyberspace. In so doing, on the one hand, I have explained how global TV formats and flows have been customised in the Chinese TV industry, often in queer ways, in order to promote state ideology and generate profits and high ratings at the same time. On the other, my analysis has highlighted that the queer employment and customisation of global TV formats in contemporary China is nothing accidental. Rather, today’s Chinese queer TV culture has always been closely interweaving with the nonnormative nature of local women’s modern history, the ambiguity of Chinese media censorship systems, and the consistent manipulation of female gender, sexuality and desire in modern and contemporary Chinese political, domestic and popular cultural domains. To further illustrate this point, the following chapters of this thesis delve into through three case studies in post-2000 China—of a formatted talk show, a singing contest and a celebrity impersonation programme—all analysed employing a queer-glocalist framework. In the next chapter dedicated to one of the most popular talk shows in today’s China, *The Jinxing Show*, the entanglement and negotiation between queer images and normative ideologies regarding gender and sexual minorities in a neoliberal, self-modernising China will be unraveled.
Chapter Two
A queer talk show in China?: a case study of The Jinxing Show

1. Introduction

In the broad terms, linguistic scholar Louann Haarman defines ‘talk shows’ as a variety of TV programmes that involve ‘conversation between elite peers, round table or group discussions, interviews, debates, topical discussions between experts and ordinary people, and talk between people, normally not peers, with interventions from a studio audience’. Chinese talk shows, which often appropriate successful daytime and late-night formats from the West and/or Hong Kong and Taiwan, have been extremely popular on both the state broadcaster, CCTV and provincial TV stations since the early 2000s. According to Li Cao’s 2010 research, in the second half of the 1990s, CCTV imported the term ‘talk show’ (tuokou xiu) as a TV production concept and programming genre to Mainland China. In recent years, Chinese talk shows have experienced substantial growth both in number and diversity. As discussed in previous chapters, since the 1990s, the government has begun to encourage the marketisation of, and ‘private investment’ in, the Chinese media industry. These reforms in turn promoted ‘media amalgamation’ and ‘the privatization of the television production sector to nurture the Chinese television production industry’. However, even during and after the reforms, TV broadcasters at all levels—including central and provincial TV conglomerates—have had to ‘follow the ideological guidelines issued by the

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2 See, Li Cao, ‘Research on the Successful Female Hosts of Chinese TV Talk Shows’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, East China Normal University, 2010). As discussed in Chapter One, in the 1990s, the notion, ‘format’, was not widely known to most of the professionals in the Chinese TV Industry. Therefore, the term, tuokou xiu, was only considered a media production concept, or a TV genre. My analysis only considers Mainland Chinese TV talk shows, some of which might be co-produced with Hong Kong-financed media companies or co-broadcast with Hong Kong-based TV stations, such as Phoenix Satellite Television.
State Administration of Radio, Film and Television or ‘its local bureau’.7 Because of this, provincial TV broadcasters and independent media production companies began to produce more light-hearted entertainment programmes, which enabled them to pursue high ratings and revenues and to evade censorship on the grounds of political content.8 As Lishuang Yu’s 2002 study on Chinese talk shows demonstrates, this tendency resulted in a proliferation of entertainment shows—including ‘entertainment talk shows’ (yule tuokouxiu).9

British TV scholar Helen Wood notes that daytime talk shows on network television in the US have great commercial potential as they ‘deliver relatively large audiences with low production costs’. 10 Within the postsocialist, reformist context of the Chinese TV industry, talk shows have become a battleground in which China’s commercial and political forces compete and sometimes even converge. For instance, in his studies of talk shows produced by both CCTV and Beijing TV in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Chinese communications scholar Yong Zhong attributes the popularity of talk shows in China to the seemingly interactive communication model this TV genre offers.11 According to Zhong, the visual and narrative formats of talk shows (such as the frequent display or discussion of brands or products during conversations) are helpful in attracting business interests.12 Nevertheless, Zhong’s analysis also demonstrates that Chinese talk shows ultimately provide a media platform for the promotion of the dominant ideologies of the party-state while offering the audience the illusion that

6 Ibid.
‘Chinese television is liberalized or democratized as a viewer-friendly participatory mass medium’. In their 2013 study, Jiangnan Zhu and Xueyong Wang present a different explanation for the popularity of Chinese talk shows. Zhu and Wang argue that this genre has succeeded in differentiating itself from previous propagandistic programmes (such as the TV news programmes produced by CCTV). They believe that the ‘open and frank conversation’ style of Chinese talk shows often present social, cultural and political elites engaging in ‘personal-level interaction’ with audiences. In this sense, the talk show format ‘provides valuable opportunities to … publicly discuss previously sensitive topics’ on TV.

Since the 2010s, with the popularisation of the Internet and digital media in China, co-distribution and co-promotion of talk shows and online interactive platforms have increased. At the same time, the wide use of social media and video-streaming sites has facilitated interaction between TV personalities and media audiences/netizens. This has further contributed to the potential of talk shows to mediate commercial power while carefully addressing social and political issues in contemporary China. For example, as mentioned in Chapter One, one of the hosts of the popular online talk show *You Can You Bibi* is the Taiwanese gay celebrity, Kevin Tsai. The show often invites guest speakers who are known to Chinese netizens as openly out lesbians or gays, who have large numbers of followers on their own social media sites. Furthermore, since its premiere in 2014, the show has been famous for its excessive product placement, which demonstrates its appeal in attracting business sponsorship. While several episodes of the show’s 2015 and 2017 seasons were dedicated to queer topics, such as those that discuss issues related to coming out, gay marriage and gender fluidity, this kind of content,

13 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p. 118.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., p. 119.
18 The Internet has been available to the general public in Mainland China since the early 2000s. The emergence of online netizens and online participatory practices in China has been visible seen starting the late 2000s.
19 For example, see https://adage.com/article/digital/china-s-online-tv-pushes-product-placement-crazy-levels/308992.
which overtly related to LGBTQ identity politics and rights in Mainland China, was often considered inappropriate and was later removed during waves of online crackdowns on ‘homosexual content’ by the government.\textsuperscript{20}

In response to the growing popularity and complexities of talk show culture in contemporary China, this chapter explores the talk show as a queerly glocalised TV format that proliferates and mobilises gender and sexual minority cultures in China. My investigation focuses on one of the most famous talk shows of the 2010s produced by a provincial station, \textit{The Jinxing Show} (\textit{TJS} hereafter). In contrast to \textit{You Can You Bibi}, which is distributed and consumed online and has been subject to less censorship (as revealed in my discussion of China’s media and online censorial practices in Chapter One), \textit{TJS} aired on Dragon TV, a Shanghai-based satellite TV broadcaster. The audience also had access to episodes of \textit{TJS} online through a number of large-scale Chinese-language video-streaming websites, where the show continues to be viewed today. Soon after its premiere, \textit{TJS} gained nationwide popularity, and its success can be partly attributed to the show’s host, Jin Xing, the first male-to-female (MTF) transsexual celebrity in China.

\textit{TJS} was largely adapted from Western late-night talk shows, but it also incorporated gendered features of American daytime talk shows, such as \textit{The Oprah Winfrey Show} (ABC, USA, 1986–2011; \textit{Oprah} hereafter) and \textit{The Ellen DeGeneres Show} (NBC, USA, 2003–present; \textit{Ellen} hereafter). My analysis in this chapter regards \textit{TJS}’s glocalised format as an arena for the public revision and negotiation of gender and sexual minorities within a cosmopolitan Chinese context. Notably, Jin is a Chinese public figure who combines an intersected gender, sexual and racial minority identity with a cosmopolitan, elitist background. She is known as a member of an ethnic minority who holds the nationality of the People’s Republic of China, a transsexual (trans hereafter) female dance artist with a worldwide reputation, the wife of a German man and the mother of three adopted children. In what follows, I examine how Jin, as a popular trans female TV talk show host,\textsuperscript{20} For more details, see \url{http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/35487/1/how-china-censors-gay-lgbt-film} and \url{https://www.ballstatedaily.com/blog/the-494/2015/09/the-494-news-chinese-government-conservative-view}.
tactically deployed her multiple socioculturally marginalised, yet also self-normalised and privileged, identities to promote cosmopolitan Chinese cultural citizenship and mediate contemporary Chinese familial, marital and social issues. My readings of the show reveal that the contradictory ways in which Jin oriented her philosophy around proper Chinese womanhood and desirable citizenship were often based on her self-narrated cosmopolitan identity, background and lived experience. Through these means, Jin worked to reconcile her transsexuality with Chinese heteropatriarchal, neoliberal society, which she survived within rather than directly challenged. Moreover, my analysis pays particular attention to the fleeting queer moments, sentiments and connotations that permeate TJS. Drawing on previous studies on Western and Chinese talk TV, I demonstrate that, by using certain televisual-cultural techniques, the show carved out a temporary, discriminative and ambivalent space that catalysed queer investments and viewing pleasures within the entwined Chinese patriotic, neoliberal and cosmopolitan discourses.

As the media reporter Abid Rahman reveals, Jin was born in 1967 to an ethnic Korean family in Shenyang, a city in Northeast China. She was a ‘dance prodigy’ and trained in ‘Russian ballet, Chinese opera, dancing and acrobatics’ with the People’s Liberation Army dance troupe from the age of nine. In her teenage years, she earned the rank of colonel in the troupe. After she turned seventeen, she received distinguished scholarships and travelled to several Western countries, including the United States (New York City), Italy and Belgium, to further her studies and teach modern dance. She worked as a professional modern dance performer and choreographer from the 1970s before becoming a famous TV personality in the early 2000s (fig. 2.1). In

23 See Rahman, “Meeting the Oprah of China.”
1994, she returned to Beijing to undergo gender reassignment surgery in her home country with the support and care of her family.

Figure 2.1: Photos of Jin performing in a modern dance musical before she became famous as a TV personality in China

As Shana Ye’s 2016 research shows, trans people still struggle with marginalisation and discrimination in contemporary Chinese society, not only in mainstream public culture and spaces but also within communities of gender and sexual minorities.24 However, Gloria Davies and M. E. Davies’s 2010 study of Jin finds that, as the most famous Chinese trans public figure, Jin received tacit approval from the government and the general public after her transition in 1995.25 Although the publicity she received at the time of her transition might have been a significant burden for other trans celebrities, Davies and Davies believe that Jin’s father’s background as a military officer may have helped her to avoid certain difficulties and granted her a degree of freedom.26 They also point out that Jin adeptly leveraged the public debates, gossip and media attention surrounding her trans female identity to construct a celebrity persona.27 For instance, she often described her transition as a rewarding, self-determining chance to be reborn as a female by going through tremendous pain and claimed that her decision to undergo the procedure in

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25 Jin is not the first recorded transsexual Chinese. The first known transsexual in Mainland China was Zhang Kesha, who transitioned in 1983. See Davies and Davies, ‘Jin Xing: China’s Transsexual Star of Dance’, p. 176.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., p. 174.
China, rather than in a Western country where doctors might have more experience with such surgery, arose out of a sense of belonging and patriotic love for her mother country.\textsuperscript{28}

Furthermore, Jin’s successful career and worldwide reputation as a modern dancer and her high-profiled familial and marital roles as the wife of a German Caucasian businessman who works in Shanghai and the mother of three adopted ethnic-Chinese children might have helped to frame her cosmopolitan, post-transition image as an influential, respectable and capable adult Chinese woman. In addition, as the \textit{South China Morning Post} reporter Kathy Cao finds, the Chinese TV audience welcomed Jin for her ‘biting wit and remarkable life story’.\textsuperscript{29} Indeed, Jin’s candid comments and cynicism often incited heated debates among her audience and attracted significant attention. In 2015, Chinese netizens selected \textit{TJS} as the ‘most truthful’ (or ‘dare-to-reveal-the-truth’; \textit{zuigan shuo zhenhua}) TV programme.\textsuperscript{30} Both Jin’s intersectional identity politics and the cultural discourses aired on \textit{TJS} made the show a crucial site for exploring how formatted TV talk shows in China navigate queer and feminist voices.

In the rest of this chapter, I first briefly introduce the general context and development of Chinese talk shows as an imported TV genre that has also been characterised by Chinese-specific gender and class-based ideals and social-political functions. Drawing on Lisa Rofel’s concept, ‘desiring China’, introduced in her 2008 monograph, \textit{Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture},\textsuperscript{31} I then trace the social-political function of talking on TV in contemporary China to the ‘speaking bitterness’ (\textit{suku}) tradition in Maoist China. As noted by Mary Farquhar and Chris Berry, the technique of ‘speaking bitterness’ has been revitalised by the

\textsuperscript{28} For instance, see \url{https://hornet.com/stories/jin-xing-china-transgender/}


Chinese Communist Party in the mass media since the late 1940s.\textsuperscript{32} I argue that Jin’s hosting style, centred on her ‘biting wit’, not only revised the tradition of ‘speaking bitterness’ but also incorporated the gossip function of Western talk shows to produce a uniquely Chinese, neoliberal rhetoric. This enabled Jin to create a talk TV culture of ‘speaking bitterly’, incorporating social critiques from a gender minority (quasi-feminist) perspective.

Next, I explicate \textit{TJS}’s format as a multi-layered amalgamation of cultures, formats and genres: a mix of traditional Chinese crosstalk (\textit{xiangsheng}; a traditional form of performing arts that features comedic performances or dialogues by one or more stand-up comedians) and Western-style late-night and daytime talk show styles; a combination of queer and feminist moments and heteropatriarchal ideologies; and a blending of nationalistic and cosmopolitan ideals. Following John Hartley’s understanding of the sociocultural function of television in ‘the formation of identity and citizenship in a society characterised by the unknowability of its nevertheless sovereign populations’, \textsuperscript{33} I demonstrate that \textit{TJS}’s queer-glocalist style enabled Jin to promote a particular form of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship. This type of queerly initiated cultural citizenship validates certain groups of gender, sexual and racial minorities, granting them desirable and respectable status, while further marginalising and silencing others who do not fit the ‘desiring China’ imaginary.

Furthermore, I provide a close reading of certain sequences of \textit{TJS} that were loaded with queer meanings, signs and narratives. On the one hand, my televiul discourse analysis shows that, by speaking bitterly, Jin, as a heterosexual (trans) female, framed herself as a survivor in a heteropatriarchal society. In constructing this celebrity persona, she created herself as a reliable feminist and patriotic icon who could guide ordinary viewers in an increasingly globalised society. Yet, in doing so, Jin refashioned Chinese traditional gender ideals, advocated Chinese-specific


neoliberalism and legitimised various kinds of inequality and hierarchy along
gender, ethnic and class lines. On the other hand, the queer-glocal duality of
*TJS* enabled Jin to transform her trans female identity into a ‘post-trans’ queer
host. While the mentality she delivered on *TJS* did not directly challenge
China’s heteropatriarchal ideologies, her talking reinvented global queer
knowledge and created the possibility of voicing certain norm-defying desires
and imaginaries in mainstream televisual spaces. In this sense, her very
presence, survival and success on mainstream Chinese TV constituted
interventions into the dominant gender/sex system structuring Chinese public
culture.

2. TV talk shows in China
The first ‘large-scale’ Chinese TV talk show to be broadcast was *Tell It Like
It Is (Shihua Shishuo; CCTV, China, 1996–2009).*\(^34\) The show premiered on
16 March 1996 and was broadcast weekly at 5:00 p.m. on Sundays. It was a
‘public-issue oriented’ programme that invited public figures to discuss the
social, cultural and political events of the day with the host and the live studio
audience.\(^35\) The show achieved nationwide success, which can be partly
attributed to the humour and sarcasm of its first male host, Cui Yongyuan.
However, as Zhanwu Zhou’s research shows, the Chinese government
considers discussing and making fun of social and political issues—as Jon
Stewart did in *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, USA, 1999–2015)—to be
politically sensitive and ideologically incorrect.\(^36\) Colin S. Hawes and Shuyu
Kong also note that this kind of political parody in the mass media, while
entertaining, is believed to aggravate social contradictions, worsen political
turbulence and endanger the stability of the entire nation.\(^37\) Because of
tightened government control over the discussion of political topics in the

\(^{34}\) The first quasi-talk show program was the live news interview show (*zhibo xinwen
tanhua jiemu*) *Dongfang Live Room (Dongfang Zhibo Shi; Shanghai Dragon TV, China,
1993).* Yet, its influence was limited to local areas. For a detailed discussion, see Cao,
‘Research on the Successful Female Hosts’.

\(^{35}\) For a discussion on ‘public-issue oriented’ TV programmes, see, Helen Wood, *Talking
with Television: Women, Talk Shows, and Modern Self-Reflexivity* (Chicago: University of

\(^{36}\) See Zhanwu Zhou, ‘Study on China News TV Talk Programs’ (unpublished doctoral

\(^{37}\) Colin S. Hawes and Shuyu Kong, “Primetime Dispute Resolution: Reality TV Mediation
770.
mass media—especially on entertainment and variety TV programmes—Cui stepped down in 2002.\(^{38}\) A female anchor, He Jing, hosted the show from 2002 to 2009, and the style of the show changed. The topics discussed were less politically provocative in accordance with the rules for broadcasting media content at the time. From that point on, the show gradually became less popular, and the network eventually cancelled it in September 2009.\(^{39}\) Although the media reported that the official reason for cancelling the show was its low ratings, many audience members, media commentators and even the show’s hosts suggested that the real reason was the complicated, constantly changing Chinese media censorship system that forbade people from hearing and telling the (politically relevant) truth.\(^{40}\)

As Zhou’s 2015 research reveals, three main types of contemporary Chinese talk shows can be identified: (1) social commentary and news shows, (2) celebrity interview shows, and (3) variety entertainment shows.\(^{41}\) Most of these shows are night-time shows broadcast between 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. and many of them highlight their hosts’ unique hosting styles. For instance, the variety talk show *Day Day Up (Tiantian Xiangshang)*, Hunan TV, China, 2008–present) features a group of male hosts called the Day Day Brothers (*tiantian xiongdi*) comprised of Mainland Chinese, Taiwanese and Korean anchors, singers and actors (fig. 2.2). There are seven male hosts in total, out of which four or five generally co-host each episode. As of late 2017, the show has been broadcast every Friday from 10:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m. It

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41 See ‘Jin Xing: Starting a Poison-Tongue Age’, *dian123* (21 November 2015) <http://www.dian321.com/yule/371514.html>, accessed 16 November 2016. There are no clear distinctions between daytime and late-night talk shows in China. And the schedules of the shows are also constantly changed. Yet, some research also points out that as the content and style of Chinese talk shows are very creative and hybridised, there can be many other ways to categorize it. See Zhou, ‘Study on China News TV’, pp. 23-27.
emphasises grassroots celebrity culture by interviewing ordinary people with special skills or exceptional life stories.\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure2.jpg}
\caption{The title card of the variety talk show \textit{Day Day Up}, which reveals the show’s male-dominated hosting style.}
\end{figure}

Many long-term public debates have addressed the gendering of Western talk shows and their social and psychological functions, especially with regard to daytime shows. For instance, a number of Western TV studies, such as those by Wood and by Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, illustrate that TV has been denigrated by elitist cultural consumers and commentators as a ‘feminine’ medium associated with private, domestic spaces and that talking on TV has often been linked to gossip, which is regarded as a ‘feminine’ (thus apparently inconsequential) mode of oral communication.\textsuperscript{43} As these scholars note, this cultural bias against TV culture has often resulted in condemnation of talk shows for their underlying voyeurism and lack of aesthetic and sociocultural values. Moreover, Wood notes that the simultaneous

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\textsuperscript{42} Chen, ‘An Analysis of the Psychology’, p. 179.
\end{flushright}
denigration and feminisation of TV, gossip and TV viewers reflects a deep-seated gender hierarchy in Western modernity.\textsuperscript{44} Similarly, certain feminist media scholars, such as Andreas Huyssen and Angela McRobbie, have suggested that the devaluation of women’s (and presumably feminine, mass and personal) cultures results from patriarchal understandings of women/the feminine as inferior to men/the masculine (which, by contrast, is seen as consequential, elitist and public).\textsuperscript{45} In addition, some studies of women and talk TV, such as those by Sherryl Wilson and Jane Shattuc, have demonstrated the significant social-political functions of talk shows,\textsuperscript{46} which include televising Western ‘consciousness raising’ projects for women and racial minorities,\textsuperscript{47} forming a feminist public sphere,\textsuperscript{48} facilitating the visibility and democratic expression of marginalised groups,\textsuperscript{49} and enabling therapeutic interventions, self-expression and self-making while discursively mediating dominant hegemonic ideals and alleviating social problems.\textsuperscript{50}

To date, studies of Chinese talk shows have examined the genre’s democratic potential to create a public sphere,\textsuperscript{51} its educational and propagandistic functions,\textsuperscript{52} the culturally specific ways in which hosts interview celebrities,\textsuperscript{53} the aesthetic similarities and differences between formatted

\textsuperscript{44}Wood, Talking with Television, pp. 13-18.
\textsuperscript{46}Sherryl Wilson, Oprah, Celebrity, and Formations of Self (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2003); and Jane Shattuc, The Talking Cure: TV Talk Shows and Women (London: Routledge, 1997).
\textsuperscript{47}See, for example, Wilson, Oprah, Celebrity.
\textsuperscript{48}See, for example, Shattuc, The Talking Cure.
\textsuperscript{49}See, for example, Joshua Gamson, Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Non-Conformity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
\textsuperscript{52}Fu and Babcock, ‘Implementing Entertainment-Education’, pp. 83–94.
Chinese and American talk shows, and the convergence of online social media, marketing and TV talk shows. As L. Cao’s research shows, the selection of Chinese talk shows’ presenters is gendered. Talk shows with themes considered masculine and serious—such as business, international politics and science—are mostly hosted by men. Although it is not rare for women to host talk shows, most of the shows hosted by women are entertainment, mediation (tiaojie) and life advice programmes that focus on personal relationships and quotidian lives (associated with feminine, mass cultural and domestic discourses). While a small number of elite, ‘mainstream’ (zhuxuanlv) or ‘high-end’ (gaoduan) programmes are hosted by women, the female hosts are often highly educated with rich life experiences and respectable sociocultural statuses.

For example, the ‘earliest high-end’ celebrity interview show, Yang Lan One-on-One (Yang Lan Fangtanlu; Beijing Satellite TV, China, 2001–present), is hosted by Yang Lan, a female journalist with a worldwide reputation and a master’s degree from Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs. In 2003, Yang was listed as ‘one of China’s 50 most successful entrepreneurs and probably China’s wealthiest self-made woman’. Yang Lan One-on-One airs every Saturday at 11:05 p.m., and each episode lasts 45 minutes. The show is known for interviewing ‘leading figures from the fields of international politics, business, society and culture’, such as Bill Clinton and Nicole Kidman.

56 Cao, ‘Research on the Successful Female Hosts’.
57 Ibid., pp. 142-145.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., p. 137.
60 See ‘Yang Lan One-on-One’, Baidu Baike <http://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%9D%A8%E6%BE%9C%E8%AE%BF%E8%B0%88%E5%BD%95>, accessed 28 February 2017.
Another interesting case in point is the high-end CCTV celebrity interview show *Art Life* (*Yishu Rensheng*; CCTV-3, China, 2000–2017), which aired every Thursday from 9:30 p.m. to 10:20 p.m. The show was hosted by a male anchor, Zhu Jun, who was famous for his emotionally charged, gushing and rhetorically elevated (*shanghai*) conversations with artists, film and TV stars and directors. This hyperemotional feature of the show was criticised by viewers, and its ratings began to decline in 2005. After several rounds of reformatting and restyling over the following decade, the programme was eventually taken off the air on 30 December 2017 due to low ratings.

One recent incident further complicated this gendered (and class-ed) culture of Chinese talk shows. On 25 July 2018, a former intern at CCTV wrote an online public post revealing that Zhu sexually harassed her ten years previously. The victim claimed that she immediately reported the harassment to the police but was told to ‘drop the charges … [and] consider “the massive positive impact” that Zhu had on mainstream Chinese society’. Facing constant threats from the police, the victim eventually gave up seeking legal redress. However, after the transnational feminist anti-sexual harassment #MeToo movement reached China in 2017, she decided to publicly reveal the attack. However, the victim’s original 2018 post was only circulated online for a few hours before it and any other articles mentioning the attack were removed from Chinese cyberspace.

Such cases show that gender stereotypes, discrimination and sometimes even attacks and harassment have permeated Chinese talk shows, the TV industry and mainstream society more generally. They reflect a misogynistic TV culture in China, within which high-end shows with elitist, masculine and

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65 Ibid.


67 Feng, ‘TV Host Zhu Jun’.
serious topics and styles are hosted by figures with professional and intellectual backgrounds, high moral standards, respectable images and less emotional hosting styles. Ironically, in Zhu’s case, when Zhu’s respectable image as a TV personality in China was disturbed by the reported sexual harassment, the female victim was the one who was silenced and threatened. As I illustrate in my analysis of TJS, Jin’s careful framing of her own personal and professional backgrounds, her rationalisation of her trans identity and her high-profiled on-screen image as a model citizen within this patriarchal TV culture significantly contributed to her success as a quasi-feminist, patriotic, cosmopolitan TV personality in the 2010s.

Apart from this gendered dimension of Chinese talk shows, the context-specific political function of talking on Chinese TV—its exhibition of ‘speaking bitterness’—may have also contributed significantly to the popularity of TJS. Speaking bitterness refers to a ritualised Chinese-specific mode of political confession practised by ordinary citizens. The practice can be traced back to the anti-imperialist artistic productions of intellectuals ‘in the May Fourth cultural enlightenment and the subsequent socialist revolution’ of 1910s China.68 As Chinese media scholar Haiqing Yu notes, in the context of its revival by the Chinese Communist Party, speaking bitterness refers to ‘public narration of past hardship and spectacularised accusation against enemies of the people’.69 It encourages ‘oppressed groups to tell stories of the bitterness they had eaten under the previous system’.70 This process facilitates ‘public recitation of personal grief’71 and represents ‘a historical imagination of overcoming [suffering, sorrow and pain]’.72 As Rofel elaborates, it is a ‘narrative performance of political resolution in which people are called on to claim heroic stature in the eyes of the nation-state’.73

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70 Rofel, Desiring China, p. 49.
72 Rofel, Other Modernities, p. 141.
73 Ibid.
Thus, the practice of speaking bitterness produces a state-backed personalised and historicised narrative aired in public spaces that ‘defines subject-positions of identification and desire; such definitions in turn encourage people to conceive of their lives according to this narrative’. The public narration of previous pain serves as a political tool that helps to legitimise the contemporary social-political system and differentiate it from previous societies, political structures and ideologies.

This logic of speaking bitterness has been widely manifest in both Chinese oral communication during the socialist era and remains prevalent in contemporary Chinese media culture. For instance, Yu views ‘the act of talking’ in both (televised) spoken and (virtual) written forms as ‘the very technology of re-subjectification, whether the talking subjects are recognized as audiences, mobizens or netizens’. Using the case study of an ordinary person speaking about AIDS on the national channel CCTV in 2002, Yu contends that speaking bitterness has been institutionalized to such an extent that it continues to subject post-socialist subalterns (women, peasants and other subgroups) to the state’s claims about natural life, producing ‘a locally specific politic of perception and experience that constituted local identities as well as national subjects’ … Even television talk shows, in the form of highly controlled interview and audience participation sessions, can be viewed as a new form of confession that testifies to state strategies about ‘human improvement’ and social control to achieve … the ‘exemplary society’ in China.

My reading of TJS builds on this conceptualisation of talking on TV as a digitally mediated and revised form of speaking bitterness. I argue that the host, Jin, transformed herself from a trans female into a (hetero-)normalised

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74 Ibid.
75 Rofel, Desiring China, pp. 48-50. Also see ibid. Mary Farquhar and Chris Berry believe that this practice also has some features of history-fiction in traditional China. See Farquhar and Berry, ‘Speaking Bitterness’, p. 117.
76 Yu, Media and Cultural Transformation, p. 68. Some scholars also contend that the revival of speaking bitterness in postsocialist Chinese TV dramas has been partially influenced by the ‘bitter-emotion’ (kuqing) style of imported 1980s’ and 1990s’ Taiwanese TV dramas and films. See, for example, Kong, Popular Media, p. 54.
subject who not only talked about the ‘bitterness’ in social reality but also spoke ‘bitterly’ on the show. In so doing, she helped to articulate the pain and suffering that she and audience members with minority gender, sexual and ethnic identities face on a daily basis. Her self-narration as an idealised post-transition subject in this ‘speaking bitterly’ process not only created more intimate bonds between Jin and her audience but also represented a neoliberal shift in Chinese public culture. As Wood notes, ‘telling the self, working on the self, and potentially transforming the self are common traits’ not only of Oprah-style daytime talk shows but also of other reality TV and makeover programmes that became popular during the neoliberalisation of Western culture and politics.78 Adapting televisual-cultural techniques from Western late-night and daytime talk shows, TJS showed the production and articulation of a cosmopolitan self for oppressed groups, such as women and migrant workers, through a neoliberal rhetoric of ‘desiring China’.

As Rofel argues, ‘desire in China … is about public narratives and the novel grounds they constructed for knowing and speaking about a post-socialist reality’.79 She explains:

> a sea-change has swept through China in the last fifteen years: to replace socialist experimentation with the ‘universal human nature’ imagined as the essential ingredient of cosmopolitan worldliness. This model of human nature has the desiring subject as its core: the individual who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest. I use the term ‘desire’ to gloss a wide range of aspirations, needs, and longings. ‘Desire’ is a key cultural practice in which both the government and its citizens reconfigure their relationship to a postsocialist world. In official, intellectual, and popular discourses, this desiring subject is portrayed as a new human being who will help to usher in a new era in China. I call the new China that this figure is supposed to produce ‘desiring China’.80

Rofel describes Chinese-specific neoliberalism as ‘a national project about global reordering’ (emphasis in original).81 She explains that the project aims ‘to remake national public culture’, which entails the production of a desiring subject.82 It ultimately contributes to the emergence of new forms of Chinese

78 Wood, *Talking with Television*, p. 27.
79 Rofel, *Desiring China*, p. 22.
80 Ibid., p. 3.
81 Ibid., p. 20.
82 Ibid.
cosmopolitan subjectivity from transcultural encounters. Rofel uses case studies to exemplify Chinese-specific ‘neoliberal subjectification processes’, including Chinese TV soap operas, women’s museums and examples of the gendered and homoeroticised consumerist cultures that have developed since the 1990s. She notes that cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics ‘is a site for the production of knowledge about what it means to be human in this reconfigured world, knowledge that is being embraced, digested, reworked, contested, and resisted in China’. Desiring, pursuing and embodying this kind of knowledge can help transform certain gendered and sexualised Chinese minorities, such as the young women and gay men discussed in her case studies, into ‘desirable, globalized’ citizens. Following Rofel’s explication of ‘desiring China’, my analysis shows that the multi-layered transcultural exchanges and creolisation of TJS—not only based on its appropriation of Western talk show formats and features but also on Jin’s own self-narrated past sufferings and current transcultural personal, professional and marital lives—envisaged and legitimised possibilities for sociocultural disadvantaged groups to transform themselves into ‘the figure of a “desiring subject”’.  

3. Glocalised talk shows on Shanghai Dragon TV

Since Shanghai culture, especially the Chinese-specific cosmopolitanism it embodies, plays a key role in TJS, it is worth examining this local context. The show was produced by a local Chinese private entertainment production company, Shanghai Canxing Productions, and aired by Shanghai Dragon TV (fig. 2.3). Canxing Productions is well known for being the first production company to bring the Western media concept of ‘commission’ (zhibofenli) into the Mainland Chinese media industry with its adapted production The Voice of China (Zhejiang Satellite TV, China, 2012-2015). The company

83 Ibid., p. 17.
84 Ibid., p. 112.
85 Ibid., p. 116.
86 Ibid., p. 5.
87 Shanghai Dragon TV was originally launched in 2003, and its signal can now reach not only most Chinese-speaking areas in Asia, but also North America and European areas. For more detailed information on this TV station, see ‘Dragon Television’, Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragon_Television>, accessed 1 February 2017.
has worked with both provincial and national TV stations, including Shanghai Dragon TV, Zhejiang Satellite TV, Jiangsu Satellite TV and CCTV, to produce entertainment programmes in global formats.89

Figure 2.3: A poster for TJS with the sensational slogan ‘I dare to talk; do you dare to listen?’, which captures the ‘bitter’ essence of the show.

Dragon TV is famous for broadcasting formatted variety programmes and talk shows. For instance, it broadcast the Chinese version of the global reality Talent franchise, China’s Got Talent between 2010 and 2013. On Baidu Baike (the Chinese version of Wikipedia), the show was named as one of the ‘most globally influential variety shows produced by Chinese provincial TV stations’.90 The station has also broadcast several other formatted reality TV shows: The Amazing Race: China Rush (2010–2012), based on the American format (CBS, USA, 2001–present); the Chinese version of the Idol franchise, Chinese Idol (2013–2014); the Chinese version of Dancing with the Stars (2014–2015), based on the British TV show Strictly Come Dancing (BBC Worldwide, UK, 2004–present); and the celebrity game show Go Fighting!

89 Ibid.
(2015–present), parts of which ‘copy’ the Korean variety show *Infinite Challenge* (MBC, South Korea, 2005–present).

Before airing *TJS*, Dragon TV experimented with other formatted talk shows. For example, beginning on 14 February 2010, the station aired a talk show called the *Mr. Zhou Live Show* (*Yizhou Libo Xiu*; China, 2010–2012) every Tuesday at 10:00 p.m. Produced by Hong Kong-based Phoenix Satellite TV, this show appropriated the format of *The Late Late Show* (CBS, USA, 1995–present). The show ran for 45 minutes per episode and was hosted by the Shanghai comedian Zhou Libo who was famous for ‘internationalized Shanghai-style small talk’ (*haipai qingkou*). This type of comic talk is a Chinese-specific (Sinophone) comedic style that combines classic Western stand-up comedy (often incorporating English oral expressions) with crosstalk in Shanghai dialect (sometimes mixed with Beijing/Mandarin and Hong Kong/Cantonese styles). Zhou is regarded as the inventor of this style. In the show, he wore dandy Western-style tuxedos and stood in the centre of a Broadway-like theatre stage with his notes on a music stand next to him. The cityscape of Shanghai with outlines of famous local landmarks, such as the Oriental Pearl TV Tower, formed the background for the show (fig. 2.4). In his monologue, Zhou used his unique talk style to provide sarcastic social commentary on current events. The *Mr. Zhou Live Show* was well received in certain regions for its blending of local art and linguistic forms with a Western stand-up comedy style TV performance.

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91 The Korean MBC TV station has accused the Chinese show of being illegally adapted from its production without purchasing its copyright because there are clear similarities between the two shows. Yet, the producers of *Go Fighting!* never admitted that the Chinese show’s production was based on the Korean show. See ‘The Korean MBC TV Station Accuses *Go Fighting!* of “Plagiarism”’, *China News* (22 July 2015) <http://www.chinanews.com/yl/2015/07-22/7421306.shtml>, accessed 15 March 2017.
92 Zhejiang Satellite TV later broadcast the show, beginning 2 April 2012.
93 Ibid.
Figure 2.4: A screen capture from the *Mr. Zhou Live Show*, which incorporated local Shanghai cultural elements into its adapted ‘live show’ stage setting.

As Lili Wang’s research reveals, the show’s regional success is largely attributed to the proximity of Zhou’s linguistic mixing to the cosmopolitan self-imagination of local Shanghai audiences.⁹⁴ Yet, the show’s depiction of Shanghai—a major Chinese city with ‘a very long history of foreign settlement and cosmopolitan culture’—caused controversy and a strong backlash from lower-class Chinese viewers.⁹⁵ As sociologist James Farrer points out, Shanghai has been well known as a ‘global city’, characterised by cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and socioculturally diverse public spaces.⁹⁶ On the show, Zhou often valorised these characteristics and the cultural heritage of Shanghai as ‘non-Chinese’ or as better than ‘other parts of China’, thus legitimising urban Shanghai natives’ sense of superiority and privilege. Many viewers from outside Shanghai criticised this portrayal for

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being regionally, culturally and socioeconomically discriminatory and unpatriotic.\textsuperscript{97}

Another famous formatted talk show on Dragon TV’s was the \textit{Tonight 80’s Talk Show} (China, 2012–2017). It premiered on 13 May 2012 and aired every Thursday at 10:30 p.m.\textsuperscript{98} Each episode lasted around 40 minutes. The show was said to be the first (hence, at its debut, the only) ‘Western-style’ Chinese talk show.\textsuperscript{99} It adapted the format of the ‘world’s longest-running talk show’, \textit{The Tonight Show} (NBC, USA, 1954–present) and featured traditional Chinese crosstalk comedian Wang Zijian, a member of the post-80s generation (balinghou yidai), as its host (fig. 2.5).

\begin{figure}[h]
  \centering
  \includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.5.png}
  \caption{A screen capture from \textit{Tonight 80’s Talk Show}, which adopted the opening monologue format of \textit{The Tonight Show}}
\end{figure}

The post-80s generation is a popular Chinese-specific term that refers to Mainland Chinese people born during the 1980s. These people grew up during a period of dramatic economic reform after China’s new policy of opening up was introduced in the late 1970s following the ten-year national upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. Due to the government’s one-child

\textsuperscript{97} Chen, ‘An Analysis of the Psychology’, p. 179.
\textsuperscript{98} The broadcasting schedule of the show often changed. Between 4 October 2014 and 7 January 2016, it aired every Saturday at 10:40 p.m.
\textsuperscript{99} See Wang and Dong, ‘An Analysis of the Success of the Production of \textit{Tonight 80s Talk Show}', p. 70; and Cao, ‘A Comparative Analysis of Aesthetics’, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{100} See \url{https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_longest-running_television_shows_by_category}. 

policy (1979–2015), each member of this generation is typically the only child in his or her family. For this reason, the post-80s generation is seen as ‘a bridge between the closed, xenophobic China of the Mao years and the globalized economic powerhouse that it is becoming’. Nevertheless, as Robert L. Moore finds, the culture of this generation is also problematically characterised by ‘egotism’, ‘coolness’ and the ‘hybridisation’ of the traditional and the modern.

The *Tonight 80’s Talk Show* specifically targeted the post-80s audience and, for each episode, invited several post-80s presenters to perform stand-up comedy. The host, Wang, wore a dashing suit with tie and dress shoes and often engaged in self-mockery, emphasising the awkwardness and frustration of his generation. A Caucasian DJ often played music in the studio. Wang had a male assistant host who wore a similar suit and stood or sat among the audience during the show. This assistant rarely talked back to Wang or the presenters on the stage and generally played the role of mediator, introducing performers and themes to facilitate transitions between different segments of the show. Another notable feature of the show was its combination of television and online media. The show was accessible online on many popular Chinese video-streaming sites and also partnered with several widely used online Chinese social networking sites—such as Sina Weibo and the most extensive cyber-communication platform, Baidu Post Bar (*baidu tieba*)—to interact with fans about new ideas and to provide up-to-date information about the show.

The two aforementioned shows aired by Dragon TV share certain features. One is their theatre-like stage settings. Both shows frequently used long shots to invite viewers to identify with the audience in the studio. For instance, the *Mr. Zhou Live Show* was presented as a stage play with a hall full of viewers.

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104 Ibid., p.71.
seated under the stage. It frequently used low-angle shots of the presenter or
of the entire stage from the studio audience’s point of view to imply that the
audience, some of whom looked amused, were looking up and enjoying the
show. The setting and camera work highlighted the power and dominance of
the presenter on the stage, prevented participation by the live audience and
TV viewers from participation and eradicated emotional closeness. This
created the impression that the show’s host was, in Wood’s words, in a
‘hierarchical position of talking down to the masses’.  

By contrast, Wang and other performers in the Tonight 80’s Talk Show often
talked directly to the studio audience and addressed questions from them,
with intercutting medium shots of audiences members’ dramatic facial
expressions. These gestures helped to create the illusion of ‘intimate’,
‘conversational’ and ‘parasocial’ relationships between the performers and
the audience. However, Wang usually opened the show by walking out
from the backstage curtain to applause from the audience and directly
addressing the camera. Other presenters on the show often marched in from
the left side of the stage and performed at a podium in the centre of the stage,
as if presenting a lecture. These visual elements reinforced rather than
disturbed the show’s theatricality.

Both the aforementioned shows, as well as other talk shows aired on Dragon
TV before the premiere of TJS, while adopting Western talk TV formats,
often mixed Western and Chinese cultures. Both shows frequently reinforced
the psychological distance between the presenters and the audience.
Moreover, Zhou used the formatted talk show as a cultural site to rationalise
the regional superiority of Shanghai as cosmopolitan, which reinforced a
sociocultural hierarchy between Shanghai natives and people in other parts
of China. Although Wang voiced the issues and desires of the younger
generation, the social commentary presented on his talk show was often
framed as a form of theatrical performance. My analysis in the following

105 Wood, Talking with Television, p. 45.
106 Ibid. Also see ibid., p. 58; and Fu and Babcock, ‘Implementing Entertainment-
Education’; and Deborah L. Larson, ‘Advancing Entertainment Education: Using The Rosie
O’Donnell Show to Recognize Implementation Strategies for Saturated Markets’,
Communication Theory 19 (2009), pp. 105-123.
sections reveals that, in contrast to earlier formatted talk shows on Dragon TV, *TJS* demonstrated a proximity between host and audience. In particular, Jin’s creative demonstration of her cosmopolitanism to express patriotic, patriarchal and nationalist sentiments and her showcasing of her own multiple minority roles to provide guidance for the audience not only created an emotional closeness between Jin and her viewers but also framed her as a desirable Chinese subject. Moreover, Jin’s speaking bitterly about class-ed social struggles and conflicts and her willingness to reveal and criticise unfairness by narrating past personal experiences largely accommodated to official cultures and thus contributed to the survival and success of *TJS* in the Chinese TV industry.

4. *The Jinxing Show*: a Chinese talk show with a trans female host

*TJS* had an alleged 100 million views per week since its premiere on 28 January 2015 (fig. 2.6). It was broadcast weekly on Wednesday nights. Initially, it aired at 10:00 p.m., but, from 24 March 2015, it was broadcast at 9:23 p.m., which is closer to prime time. The show was ranked among the highest-rated entertainment shows to be broadcast by a provincial station during this time slot.

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107 Rahman, ‘Meet the Oprah of China’.
Figure 2.6: A screen capture of the monologue segment of TJS, which demonstrates that the show adapted and mixed certain recognisable elements from the stage settings of popular Western talk shows.

Similar to the Tonight 80’s Talk Show, TJS used social media and streaming sites for distribution and promotion. It was simultaneously broadcast online on one of ‘China’s biggest video site[s]’, Youku Tudou (the Chinese version of YouTube). TJS was also accessible on the most widely known and used Chinese online portal, Sohu.com, and on the largest online video site in China, iQiyi (similar to Netflix). Through its use of online media, the show also capitalised on Jin’s celebrity status. Both the show and Jin had their own Sina Weibo accounts, and by 23 February 2017, the show’s Weibo account had more than 829,000 followers while Jin’s account had over 11,319,000 followers. Both accounts were used to promote the show and to interact with fans and audiences on a weekly basis. Jin’s Weibo followers often engaged in online discussions with each other and interacted with Jin to request her opinion on certain controversial social and political issues or to suggest cutting-edge themes for future shows. This high level of interactivity and intimacy between Jin and her show’s viewers was further reflected in the show’s studio arrangements, formats, hosting and performance styles and in its content and themes.

As shown in Figures 2.6 and 2.7, the backdrop of TJS featured the skyline of one of the most famous scenic spots in China, the Bund of Shanghai. As Xiaomei Zhou and Yue Wu report, the show did not have a large, ‘extravagantly furnished’ studio. The TJS studio was relatively small and less luxurious than those of other Chinese talk shows. In its compact live studio with a relatively small audience, a live band was positioned on the left side of the screen. Behind the band at the back-left corner of the stage hung a

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wall-mounted flat-screen TV. The placing of a TV screen in the studio is similar to the setting of the British chat show *The Graham Norton Show* (BBC Two, 2007-2009; BBC One, 2009-present), which features the openly gay male celebrity, Norton, as host. This may be an example of *TJS*’s queer referencing. However, the screen on *The Graham Norton Show* is often used for live, interactive conversations between the host and out-of-studio guests, whereas the screen on *TJS* was often used to show the studio audience pre-recorded videos that Jin found interesting and wanted to discuss on the show. This element of *TJS*’s setting was reminiscent of popular social rituals of community TV viewing and gatherings of neighbours, friends, family members and co-workers in 1980s China.\(^{112}\) As media scholar Huike Wen notes, during the 1980s when the TV set had just become available in China as a luxurious entertainment technology, those who owned or had control of a TV set were usually socially or politically important and powerful.\(^{113}\) Therefore, this glocalised setting with queer connotations not only legitimised Jin as a powerful speaking subject who controlled the communication on the show and provided advice to the audience but also created a Chinese-specific sense of communal intimacy between Jin and the live audience.

\[\text{Figure 2.7: TJS}’\text{\ s setup, which borrowed and revised some visual styles of certain American late-night talk shows}\]


\(^{113}\) Ibid., pp. 48-50.
Furthermore, as the screen capture of TJS’s stage setup shown in Figure 2.7 shows, the right side of the screen was occupied by an executive desk and a black leather executive chair for Jin. Next to the desk on the left were two red armchairs for celebrity guests, which, as I explain in the next section, was TJS’s signature feature. This setup was largely modelled on ‘the basic visual grammar’ of most American late-night, male-hosted talk shows, such as Conan (TBS, USA, 2010-present) and The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon (NBC, USA, 2014-present). This setting usually accommodates late-night talk show hosts who ‘sit slightly upstage (farther back and slightly elevated) from their guests, which … reinforce[s] the notion of a power imbalance’ between the hosts and the guests. However, other cultural and visual features of TJS disturbed this often-gendered power hierarchy.

On the show, Jin always wore a modern Chinese cheongsam (zhongguo qipao), a dress style derived from a classic women’s dress popular during the Qing Dynasty. According to Matthew Chew’s research, since 2000, the cheongsam has seen a resurgence in popularity and has become a ‘national symbol’ and a form of nostalgic fashion in Chinese public culture. As Jin constantly emphasised during media interviews and on the show, the ‘cheongsam is a traditional aesthetic signifier of China and Chinese culture’, which represents the elegance of Chinese women. At the beginning of each episode, medium and long shots were frequently used to frame Jin walking or dancing in a cheongsam, presenting her as an example of a typical, elegant Chinese woman ‘situated on the stage’. Thus, Jin was televisually presented (or ‘normalised’) as an authentic and ‘classic’ Chinese goddess for the audience to look up to and appreciate, as well as a role model for Chinese

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115 Ibid.
118 For discussions on the functions of medium and long shots on talk shows, see Karen Lury, Interpreting Television (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005), pp. 27-30.
women. At the same time, a camera, positioned at eye-level from the perspective of the live audience, showed her walking into the studio from backstage to applause before directly addressing the camera. *TJS* did not use a laugh track or ‘canned laughter’,¹¹⁹ which other Chinese talk shows often do, but rather showed audience members reacting passionately with deafening applause and cheers to the humorous comments of Jin and other presenters. The show frequently used medium or close-up shots to reveal the facial expressions and responses of studio audience members.¹²⁰ Thus, TV viewers were ‘encouraged to identify with … the studio audience’ of *TJS*.¹²¹ It was also common for Jin and other presenters on the show to interact with the studio audience. These features further shortened the psychological distance between the performers on the stage and the studio audience.

As Tao Fu and William A. Babcock note, each episode of *TJS* ran for 65 minutes and contained three major segments, the length and order of which varied from episode to episode. The segments consisted of the standalone monologue (*tuokou xiu*), the section of ‘Things to Ask Sister Jin’ (*youhua wen Jin Jie*), during which Jin discussed hot topics and answered questions from her online viewers, and the section of the celebrity interview (*mingxing fangtan* or *Jin Xing shijian*), which consisted of ‘a 30-minute interview of celebrities mainly with actors and singers and occasionally entrepreneurs’.¹²² The monologue and celebrity interview segments mostly focused on trendy public issues closely related to the everyday life and interests of the masses, especially issues concerning women, marriage, children, education, family, and controversial topics relating to celebrity and pop culture. Fu and Babcock note that Jin played a dominant role in the planning, production and staging of the show and in determining its content.¹²³ For instance, as they explain, Jin’s monologue sometimes lasted for more than a third of the show, which highlights the weight granted to her personal opinions.¹²⁴ Moreover, she

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¹²² Fu and Babcock, ‘Implementing Entertainment-Education’, p. 86.
¹²³ Ibid.
¹²⁴ Ibid.
claimed the right to choose the topics to discuss and the celebrities to invite onto the show.\textsuperscript{125} Every episode of the show had a specific theme, presented as ‘Let’s chat about …’ (\textit{Liaoliao … naxie shier}). Furthermore, when addressing her audience, Jin referred to herself as ‘your elder sister Jin’ (\textit{nide Jin Jie}). This way of positioning herself in a Chinese context suggested the simultaneous ‘power’, ‘status’ and ‘credibility’ of ‘a family member or close friend’.\textsuperscript{126}

Moreover, in contrast to contemporary Chinese variety shows, which are often notoriously peppered with minutes-long advertisement breaks, there were no commercial breaks on \textit{TJS}. Although the Chinese brand ‘Super Power Liquid Detergent’ (\textit{chaoneng xiyiye}) financed the show, its advertisements were often embedded within the show as product placements. For instance, the slogan ‘Super Power Women’ (\textit{chaoneng nüren}), which references the product’s target female customer, often appeared on the TV screen, in front of Jin’s desk or on the studio backdrop. More often than not, Jin parodically appropriated the commonly used transition line before commercial breaks, ‘don’t walk away. The show will be back right after the commercials’ (\textit{qingbie zoukai. guanggaozhihou, mashanghuilai}).\textsuperscript{127} Having read the slogan of the advertiser which supported the show’s production and broadcasting, she mocked the capitalism of the Chinese TV advertisement industry by saying, ‘Without commercials, the show will be right back’. This mockery also framed Jin as a ‘down-to-earth’ host who was here to speak with, and for, ordinary TV viewers and commodity consumers rather than to serve commercial interests.\textsuperscript{128}

Unlike the hosts of the \textit{Mr. Zhou Live Show} and the \textit{Tonight 80’s Talk Show}, Jin constantly emphasised that she did not ‘perform’ humour or sarcasm or ‘internationalised Shanghai-style’ (\textit{haipai}). Instead, she professed to speak out about what she truly believed and what she wanted to say on the show. In

\textsuperscript{125} Sun, ‘One Talk Show’, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., p. 89
\textsuperscript{128} Wood, \textit{Talking with Television}, p. 45.
fact, *TJS*’s format can be regarded as a combination of the influential features of many popular American daytime and late-night talk shows and elements of Chinese ‘dual dialogue crosstalk’ (*duikou xiangsheng*; comedic conversations and performances by two stand-up comedians). For instance, Jin’s co-host, Xiao Nan, sat below the stage with the audience and often responded humorously to Jin during the show. The interaction between Jin and her co-host replicated some characteristics of American celebrity talks shows and resembled the comic dialogues of traditional Chinese crosstalk artists. The show also featured sketch performances by Jin and Xiao Nan (often featuring dancing and singing). These performances frequently combined elements of soap operas, sitcoms, talk shows such as *The Late Late Show with James Corden* (CBS, USA, 2015-present) and Western variety shows such as *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, USA, 1975-present).

Apart from these performances, the show’s ‘money shot[s]’ were Jin’s accounts of her personal sufferings in the past and her current privilege as an active, successful female figure in the Chinese entertainment industry. She delivered these narratives as gossip-style accounts. Deborah Jones describes gossip as ‘essentially talk between women in our common role as women’ and identifies its four main functions as ‘house-talk’, ‘scandal’, ‘bitching’ and ‘chatting’. According to Jones, gossip is ‘a language of intimacy’ arising ‘from the solidarity and identity of women as members of a social group of a pool of common experience’. It enables women to discuss ‘the domestic issues that connect women’s lives’, realises a form of ‘mutual self-disclosure’, facilitates ‘the moral judgement of the behaviours of others’ and represents a communal arena ‘where we can berate those who have done us wrong or locate our experience in relation to another’s experience to feel superior’.

Jin’s gossip-style talking on *TJS* combined these sociocultural and psychological functions of gossip between women. More importantly, through her ‘gossip’ not only about her ‘bitter’ past (self-disclosure) but also

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131 Ibid., p. 195.
about certain social-political issues in contemporary China (moral judgement), she successfully constructed herself as a ‘desiring subject’ who could guide gender, sexual, ethnic and other sociocultural minorities through the neoliberal, cosmopolitan Chinese fantasy. Thereby, she epitomised a contemporary Chinese model of ‘individualisation thesis’, which is, in anthropologist Yunxiang Yan’s words, ‘a specific strategy to pursue modernity [in which] the individual must take more responsibility and proactive actions for the sake of achieving the wealth and power of the nation-state, namely, the modernization of country’.

For example, Jin’s gossip-style monologues often revealed insider stories about celebrities and provided advice on marriage, child-raising and family harmony. She once joked that she was the ‘housekeeping lady in show biz’ (yulequan de baojie ayi). She often dedicated her monologues to celebrity scandals and controversial contemporary issues that attracted public attention. Some of these monologues ridiculed powerful Chinese celebrities and exposed their backstage stories. In one 2015 episode, Jin openly criticised the famous male musician David Tao who comes from a distinguished and powerful Taiwanese celebrity family. Jin called Tao a ‘jerk’ (zha’nan) for his extramarital affairs and the misogynistic way in which he ‘slut-shamed’ his mistress after she publicly revealed their chat records. These feminist critiques helped Jin to develop intimacy and connection with her female audience and attracted a large number of female (and feminist) fans.

Overall, these stylistic and cultural elements of the show created a complex impression. On the one hand, they portrayed Jin as an extraordinary Chinese woman who was also ‘one of the people’ and who chatted with her viewers, especially female ones. On the other hand, these features helped to strengthen the illusion that Jin, ‘as a woman in her late 40s, who has overseas education...’

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133 For discussions on this theory in the West, see, for example, Ulrich Beck, Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity (London: Sage, 1992); and Anthony Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).
135 The Jinxing Show, Shanghai Dragon TV, 28 September 2016, 9.23 p.m.
136 The Jinxing Show, Shanghai Dragon TV, 15 July 2015, 9.23 p.m.
137 Fu and Babcock, ‘Implementing Entertainment-Education’, p. 91.
and work experience, a successful career, [an] interracial marriage, and a happy family’, was qualified to speak to the ordinary Chinese people’s situations and to provide them with life guidance.\textsuperscript{138}

Many media commentators compared \textit{TJS} to popular American talk shows, such as \textit{Oprah}, \textit{The Daily Show} (Comedy Central, USA, 1996-2015) and \textit{Ellen}, which are well known to Chinese audiences.\textsuperscript{139} Due to its popularity in the United States, \textit{Ellen} was the ‘first daily American [talk] show of its kind to be distributed [online] in China’.\textsuperscript{140} It debuted in January 2014 on Sohu.com.\textsuperscript{141} Although it features a lesbian host, which might be considered a target for censorship in a still-heteronormative China, \textit{Ellen} has been well received nationwide. This is partly because the show’s queer and feminist political agenda—if it has one—might be further mitigated by the Chinese audience’s glocalist (or Occidentalist) mode of consumption. As my previous research on online Chinese fandom of Western queer media and celebrities shows, the West is often imagined as a queer-friendly place (the opposite of the heteronormative mainstream society of China) by contemporary Chinese audiences.\textsuperscript{142} In this sense, a talk show hosted by a Caucasian lesbian and produced in a seemingly open-minded, free Western country might seem to be less ‘subversive’ or ‘threatening’ to local dominant gender and sexual systems in the eyes of the Chinese audience and the government, as everything about the show is assumed to be ‘non-Chinese’ and thus not to accommodate to normative Chinese cultures or ‘misguide’ Chinese audiences. However, judging from the online responses of Chinese viewers, \textit{Ellen} and its host are often considered ‘funny’, ‘positive’, ‘generous’ and ‘heart-

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., p. 89.
\textsuperscript{142} See, Jing Jamie Zhao, ‘Queering the Post-\textit{L Word} “Shane” in the “Garden of Eden”: Online Chinese Fans’ Gossip about the American Actress Katherine Moennig’, in Maud Lavin, Ling Yang and Jing Jamie Zhao (eds.), \textit{Boys’ Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan} (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017), pp. 63-90.
warming’, while the host Ellen DeGeneres is a respectable role model for some Chinese queer viewers and fans.143

Because both shows feature a minority host in terms of gender and sexuality, a number of TV commentators and viewers referred to TJS as the Chinese version of Ellen.144 Indeed, the shows have many common features, including dancing hosts. TJS often presented Jin performing short, impromptu dance sequences on the stage (fig. 2.8). However, these differ from DeGeneres’s casual, interactive dancing during her talk show, since Jin’s dancing was usually sporadic. In addition, Jin rarely danced alongside the audience, which DeGeneres often does. Jin’s dancing was often framed as a serious theatrical performance, which highlighted the fact that she was a world-famous ‘professional dancer’ (wuzhe), a role she constantly emphasised. Thus, the dancing on TJS contributed to the representation of Jin as an elegant Chinese cultural symbol and a globally renowned artist with an elevated sociocultural status for ordinary viewers, especially female ones, to appreciate and admire.

Figure 2.8: A screen capture of Jin dancing with one of her female celebrity guests. Such performances often ironically showcased that Jin could dance in a more feminine and attractive manner than her female guests.

143 See, for example, https://www.zhihu.com/question/21781674; and https://radiichina.com/ji-quan-chinese-girls-love-female-celebrities/?bclid=IwAR1aerhmFOLfb1Z4i96ce5mMAKVzhK7YUspzO6F_Bs9LflhcaomDWPSt1M
As my analysis above reveals, *TJS* not only appropriated certain televisual formats and features of Western talk shows but also incorporated Chinese-specific gender, televisual, communicative and political practices. By creatively fusing global and local televisual-cultural elements, the show framed Jin as a reliable, decent representative who could speak with, for and to the general public, especially women. My analysis in the next section shows how the show’s local and transcultural queer referencing periodically opened up queer spaces and encouraged audiences to take queer viewing pleasure in Jin’s talking on TV.

Jennifer Reed reveals that DeGeneres changed her public persona over the years from ‘apolitical’ and ‘queer’ to ‘political activist’ and ‘lesbian’ and subsequently to ‘the domesticated day-time talk show host’ with a ‘neutralized … political edge’ and a ‘post-gay’ position within a society that is still largely heteronormative and homophobic to adapt to the needs of her mostly heterosexual audience.  

Similarly, Andrew Tolson finds that *Oprah* was neither purely ‘progressive’ nor completely ‘regressive’ in terms of its feminist positions. Rather, as Eva Illouz points out, the show’s host, Oprah Winfrey, advised her audience on ‘how to cope with a world that consistently fails us’. In a similar vein, as my readings of some crucial sequences of *TJS* in the following sections reveal, Jin deployed a subtle talking technique that combines the Chinese ritual of speaking bitterness with TV talk as a form of gossip. In so doing, she captured the synthesised mentality of ‘desiring China’, a quasi-feminist rhetoric underpinned by state-level heteropatriarchal regulations and policies and an ambiguous ‘post-trans’ queer appeal. Thus, the show demonstrated a complex, Chinese-specific ‘individualisation thesis’ in a neoliberal age, while also admitting certain feminist possibilities and implicitly inviting queer investments and sentiments.

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147 Illouz, *Oprah Winfrey*, p. 3. Also see Wilson, *Oprah*. 
5. Speaking bitterly and queerly on Chinese TV

Jin’s televisual celebrity persona, and especially her trans female identity, has provided a particularly intriguing example of public negotiations of female gender and sexuality within a neoliberalist, cosmopolitan Chinese context. For instance, in early 2011, it was reported that Jin ‘was axed as a judge on a TV talent show because she has had a sex change’. Yet, only a few years later, Jin’s service as a celebrity judge on the Chinese version of So You Think You Can Dance (Shanghai Dragon TV, China, 2013; Zhejiang Satellite TV, China, 2014–present) quickly propelled her to the status of an idol and public spokesperson. This rise to stardom on reality TV has been largely attributed to Jin’s ‘bitter’ (dushe) hosting style. Her artist status, cosmopolitan experiences, sarcastic comments on the dance performances of the show’s participants, and sarcastic social commentary have all contributed to her transformation into a popular talk show host (mingzui). Partly as a result of her careful narration not only of the pain she went through during her transition but also of her post-transition romantic, sexual and marital life in the mainstream media, Jin has been lionised by media commentators and Chinese audiences as both a norm-defying queer icon and a feminist social critic. These aspects of her TV personality were accentuated on TJS.

Although some of TJS’s themes directly touched upon government policies, Jin often offered alternative mediation strategies and advice that did not explicitly challenge the party-state or the sociocultural inequalities in Chinese society. Furthermore, her unique, cynical and paradoxical views on issues related to gender and sexuality were interwoven with Chinese-specific

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150 Sun, ‘One Talk Show’, p. 96.

neoliberal discourses on self-governance in a cosmopolitan cultural context. This enabled her to narrate, perform and, thus, discursively promote a series of reconfigured normative ideals about how to become a better self.

5.1. A Chinese trans women as a qualified wife and mother

Many female viewers of TJS lauded Jin for her frankness and her feminist attitudes to women’s extramarital affairs, premarital dating and premarital sex. For instance, Jin openly admitted to having numerous male romantic and sexual partners before marrying her current German husband. She claimed that these premarital experiences provided her with knowledge of relationships and eventually led to her happy marriage. Paradoxically, Jin’s feminism was often underpinned by carefully delivered neoliberal solutions to gender- and class-based problems in mainstream Chinese culture.

On 4 August 2013, Jin gave a well-received public lecture in Shanghai entitled ‘How to Wisely Get Along with This Patriarchal Society?’ In the talk, she discussed her philosophy of how to become a ‘virtuous wife and good mother’ (xianqi liangmu) —— a gender ideal defined by traditional Chinese Confucianism. She spoke of reconciling with, and surviving within rather than directly challenging, Chinese heteropatriarchal society. One important piece of wisdom she delivered in her speech was that married women have their own obligations, roles and responsibilities to fulfil. She repeatedly stated that women should not strive to act stronger, smarter and more powerful than their husbands, claiming that such behaviour would not do women any good in the long term.

Similar recitations of historical Confucian gender ideals, gender-biased suggestions and coping mechanisms for adapting to prevalent heteronormative familial and marital problems were common on TJS. These views often emphasised individual self-improvement and survival. The symbolic meaning of the two red armchairs provides an instructive example. Jin often joked that these armchairs, which were for celebrity interviewees,

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152 The public lecture was given in Mandarin. Its Chinese title is “Ruhe yu zhege nanquan shehui zhihui xiangchu?” For a full video of the talk, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wwR6MkIWVU
possessed mystical powers that increased the chances of celebrities, especially female ones, having perfect marriages and children. Before conducting celebrity interviews, Jin always asked her guests to select which seat they would like to take. She explained that one armchair would bring them a good marriage and the other would bring them children. She also urged celebrities who were not married to choose the ‘good marriage’ seat first, because, as she constantly emphasised and joked about, she regarded pregnancy outside of marriage as indecent, disgraceful and not worthy of celebration.

This view of premarital pregnancy as improper contrasts sharply with Jin’s opinion of premarital sex as desirable for women. This contrast discursively resonates with the government’s recent family-planning laws, which stipulate that ‘an unmarried mother must pay a fine, even if it is her first child’ and reflects the fact that ‘while premarital sex has become common, unmarried motherhood has remained a taboo’. On 1 January 2016, the government ended its one-child rule, which had been in effect since 1979. The government instead enacted a two-child policy, which encouraged married couples to have two children. This change in China’s family-planning system aims to ‘ease demographic pressures’ and remedy the ‘labour shortage’, especially in urban areas of Mainland China. However, the law for single mothers has not been altered.

In response to this recent relaxation of the family-planning rules, Jin proudly referred to herself on TJS as the ‘parturition hastening midwife’ of show business (yulequan de cuishengpo). During celebrity interviews and monologue segments, she repeatedly stressed that many Chinese people who were born during the ‘only-child generation’ (dusheng zinü yidai; the

155 The Jinxing Show, Shanghai Dragon TV, 2 December 2015, 9:23pm.
generation born after 1979 in Mainland China) are often selfish, do not know the pleasure of sharing, and do not understand the benefits of having siblings. She used her own sister as an example to illustrate the love and bonding in extended families and the benefits of having siblings to share parental care responsibilities and take care of each other if necessary.

The ‘Things to Ask Sister Jin’ segment of a 2016 episode provides another example of the mingling of heteropatriarchal and feminist views expressed through a narrative of self-cultivation. During this segment, Jin answered a viewer’s question about how to cope with the expense of raising two children. Referring to her own experience of adopting and raising three children alone in her early thirties during the early 2000s, Jin responded with the opinion that parents who cannot afford to raise two children should blame themselves for being poor and weak. She admitted to struggling financially as a single mother and disclosed that being single with three adopted children made it difficult for her to find suitable men to date and perhaps marry. However, she claimed that the ideal way to deal with such a situation is to find a kind, reliable husband who would be a good father to the children. She claimed that creating a wholesome family that included a husband and children made her feel happy and satisfied.

Later in the same episode, Jin answered another question about purchasing safe milk for infants from foreign purchasing agents (guowai daigou naifen). The safety of milk powder sold in China has worried parents since 2008 when thousands of infants were poisoned by contaminated milk produced by domestic dairies. In response, Jin criticised mothers in Mainland China who buy milk for their children and claimed that mothers should breastfeed their children. In doing so, she shifted the focus from acute social problems in contemporary Chinese society—food safety and gender inequality reflected in the government’s patriarchal manipulation of the female body in heterosexual marriage and childrearing (often focusing on women’s

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156 Ibid.
reproductive capabilities)—to self-improvement, self-making and the personal responsibilities of individuals. Ironically, Jin did not mention how she raised her own three adopted children. As a trans female, she cannot breastfeed. Yet, when discussing the lives of her children, she often emphasised that she, as a perfect mother, allowed her children to retain the nationality of the People’s Republic of China and to grow up under the combined influence of both Chinese and Western cultures. Highlighting her patriotic yet cosmopolitan educational methods, this self-narration played down the real-life difficulties of trans single mothers in China who might be doubly or even triply marginalised and disempowered by gender and sexual inequalities and food safety issues. Often using stories from her own life as examples of how to achieve success, Jin’s talking on *TJS* advocates the individualisation thesis for Chinese adult women who are often socioculturally disadvantaged in contemporary social reality. Rather than voicing and directly problematising the social inequality, discrimination and injustice faced by Chinese women in their familial and conjugal roles, Jin’s talking strategies apparently align her with her female audience, while at the same time promoting the state’s neoliberal-patriarchal ideals and economic-political policies by placing ‘emphasis on individual responsibility and self-reliance’.

5.2. *A qualified Chinese citizen during transcultural encounters*

Jin’s persistent emphasis on self-making, proper behaviour and individual responsibility to become a proper Chinese citizen was not limited to the public cultures of female gender and sexuality but often extended to the expression of nationalistic sentiments, the stereotyping of non-Chinese cultures, and the idealisation of China and Chineseness in transcultural contexts. The first episode of *TJS*, broadcast on 28 January 2015, is a case in point. *TJS*’s premiere episode set the neoliberal-cosmopolitan tone for the show. It opened with a short jazz dance by a group of young Chinese performers wearing dovetail suits. After the dance, Jin walked onto the stage, bowed to the live audience, and introduced two ‘bodyguards’ who were standing on the stage next to a piano. Interestingly, the bodyguards were

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played by two very tall, macho, non-Chinese male extras—one Caucasian and the other African American. Jin referred to the two bodyguards as ‘black and white twin killers’ (heibai shuangsha; a classic Chinese phrase that is often used to denote two valiant warriors who mutually complement each other).

In both English and Chinese, Jin asked the bodyguards to say ‘hi’ to the audience. They replied in Mandarin but with noticeably foreign accents: ‘Welcome to The Jinxing Show. Please excuse us for any faults you may find in the entertainment. Thank you all!’ (Huanying guanglin Jinxing Show. Zhaogu buzhou, qingduo baohan. Xiexie dajia!). They used Chinese expressions and language not commonly used in oral discourse but awkwardly adapted from formal Chinese. The audience was surprised and applauded their Chinese greetings. Jin then introduced her pianist—a young Chinese man in a dashing suit—and danced to a short melody he played. The audience applauded Jin’s dancing, and Jin said ‘thank you!’ in English. She then introduced her co-host in Chinese: ‘And my assistant Xiao Nan [who is] very foreign flavoured, very Japanese, very fashionable’ (Haiyou wode zhuli Xiao Nan. Hen yangqi, hen rixi, hen shishang). She joked that Xiao Nan’s short legs were particularly Japanese.159 After the introductions, Jin turned to her bodyguards, saying in English, ‘Thank you very much, boys! Go outdoors to protect me! Get the big power out!’ Following her orders, the two foreign extras exited the stage.

This opening sequence carries many sociocultural implications regarding China’s self-imagined global power and cosmopolitanism. For instance, the spectacular jazz dance performance, the piano accompaniment and Jin’s own dance and bilingual introduction demonstrate Chinese mastering of Western modern dance forms, classical musical instruments and foreign languages and cultures. The stereotypical images of Caucasian and African American men as hyper-masculine, primitive warrior types, yet able to speak Chinese and work to protect a Chinese trans female host, represent what Lauren Gorfinkel

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159 It is a Chinese stereotype that Japanese people are much shorter and smaller-sized than most Chinese people. Here, Jin intended to joke about Xiao Nan as a very short guy.
and Andrew Chubb have called ‘foreign performances of Chineseness to present to domestic audiences the image of a powerful... Chinese nation, firmly at the centre of world civilization’. 160 Moreover, the sarcastic comments (a form of speaking bitterly) on the stature and fashion sense of co-host Xiao Nan refer to a hierarchical distinction between Chinese culture (imagined as a delicate, sophisticated culture with 5,000 years of history, currently rising again in a globalised world), Western culture (which awkwardly combines barbaric and modernised elements but has some developed features that Chinese people should emulate or domesticate) and other non-Chinese Asian cultures (such as that of Japan, a nation that has been in a love-hate relationship with China for hundreds of years and whose culture once swept across Mainland China not only in the form of military aggression in the Modern era but also through waves of inter-Asian pop culture in the past decade). These elements combine to present an image of China as a modernised, desirable, and powerful nation. 161

In a monologue performed during the same episode, Jin announced that she has begun her talk show to discuss something ‘truthful’, ‘poisoning’ (or bitter) and ‘ruthless’ (kashi shuozhehua, dushe, shuohenhua). She then introduced her first topic——the local Shanghai concept of ‘tune-pattern’ (qiangdiao). ‘Tune-pattern’ is a local phrase commonly used by Shanghai natives to denote a person’s ‘quality’ (suzhi), ‘style’ (fengge) and ‘aura’ (qichang). In particular, it refers to the politics of suzhi (human quality), which emerged during the economic reforms in 1980s China. 162

Suzhi, or human quality, is a national, class-related hegemony that creates distinctions between proper or desirable conduct on the one hand and improper or undesirable behaviours, desires, subjectivities and bodies on the


161 Some research refers to this kind of nationalist propaganda in entertainment media as the mentality of ‘the rise of the Middle Kingdom’. For example, see Gorfinkel and Chubb, pp. 121–140.

other. Rofel provides a critical reading of *suzhi* in her conceptualisation of
gendered and sexualised discourses on contemporary Chinese
cosmopolitanism.\(^{163}\) She notes that two common practices position China
within a newly imaged world order——‘a self-conscious transcendence of
locality’ through consumption and the practice of ‘domesticating
cosmopolitanism’ through ‘the bodies of young women’.\(^ {164}\) According to
Rofel, other practices that can achieve this goal include the study of foreign
languages, cross-border tourism and the formation of transnational social
networks, including familial-marital relationships.\(^ {165}\) These cosmopolitan
practices facilitate a Chinese-specific ‘quality’ (*suzhi*) discourse. For instance,
urban, middle-class gay men are considered relatively high quality (*gao suzhi*)
in cosmopolitan China and can thus embody (at least partially) a form of
legitimate, proper Chinese cultural citizenship. In contrast, rural migrant male
sex workers are deemed low-quality (*di suzhi*) and thus improper, victimised
and delegitimised.\(^ {166}\)

The episode revealed Jin’s understanding of tune-pattern, a particular regional
embodiment of *suzhi*, to be highly gendered, class-based and underpinned by
a neoliberal-cosmopolitan logic. She began her discussion of tune-pattern by
talking about how to make and wear a cheongsam (*qipao*; a traditional
Chinese dress popular during the Qing Dynasty). As a person who often wore
a cheongsam, Jin claimed that the cheongsam should be practical and suitable
for daily wear and that its design and tailoring should be compatible with the
‘quality’, ‘status’, ‘age’ (*qizhi*, *shenfen*, *nianling*) and career of the woman
who wears it. As an example, she claimed that the close-fitting cheongsam
with high side vents (*gao kaicha*) should only be worn by certain kinds of
‘professional women’ (implicating female sex workers) for special purposes.
This statement betrayed a condescending, discriminatory attitude towards

\(^{163}\) Rofel, *Desiring China*.
\(^{164}\) Ibid., pp. 129–130.
\(^{165}\) Rofel, *Desiring China*. Also see Geng Song, ‘Imagining the Other: Foreigners on the
Chinese TV Screen’, in Ruoyun Bai and Geng Song (eds), *Chinese Television in the
\(^ {166}\) Rofel, *Desiring China*, pp. 85–110. Also, see Travis S. K. Kong, ‘Outcast Bodies:
Money, Sex and Desire of Money Boys in Mainland China’, in Ching Yau (ed.), *As Normal
as Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong* (Hong
Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), pp. 31–33.
female sex workers that was not uncommon in Jin’s talks on socially acceptable and laudable behaviour for Chinese women. For instance, later in her monologue, Jin joked that even in a narrow alley, only ‘prostitutes’ (yaojie’er)\(^{167}\) would walk against the wall or in the shade (jintie zhe qianggen’er zoulu), implying that prostitution is shameful and illegal and that prostitutes do not dare to walk in the daylight (because this would make them to easier for the police to identify and arrest them).

She proceeded to comment on the male embodiment of tune-pattern, referring to a newspaper article she had recently read entitled ‘Chinese Men Are Unworthy of Chinese Women’ (Zhongguo nanren peibushang zhongguo nüren). The article stated that Chinese men’s tastes in fashion were inferior to those of Chinese women. Jin agreed and explained to the audience that clothes reflect ‘taste’ (pinwei), which is an important aspect of tune-pattern. Using one of her good male friends as an example, Jin claimed that if an otherwise good man did not wear decent and appropriate clothes, he would be unable to attract women and could only be a good friend. She also emphasised that she has met many wealthy men who were too ‘rustic’ (tu; baofahu) in their fashion tastes.\(^{168}\) She claimed that these men, despite having high social statuses and significant economic power, still did not possess proper tune-pattern. Therefore, according to Jin, tune-pattern has nothing to do with how much money people spend on their clothes. Rather, it is a concept closely associated with people’s ‘sense of self-regulation’ (ziwo guanli yishi) regarding public behaviour and presentation. She added that she enjoyed reminding Chinese men to improve their taste in fashion. She claimed that if women wanted to embody tune-pattern, they should encourage their male partners to better their fashion tastes and subtly (without nagging) improve their tune-pattern.

\(^{167}\) The Chinese phrase Jin uses to denote prostitutes in the monologue is an old-fashioned, derogatory term. It is similar to the English word ‘whore’ or ‘hooker’.

\(^{168}\) In contemporary Chinese culture, people often deem being rustic or countrified as the opposite of being Western- or Japanese-style. Rustic Chinese people are not urbanized and high quality, and thus unable to represent a cosmopolitan image of Chinese citizens in a globalised world. For a more detailed discussion on this topic, see Song, ‘Imagining the Other’, pp. 110–111.
This part of the monologue was followed by clips of pre-recorded street interviews shown on the TV screen in the studio, in which people were asked to explain their understanding of ‘tune-pattern’. Some interviewees thought that people could obtain tune-pattern through ‘self-cultivation’ (tigao xiuyang). After the interview clips, Jin further emphasised this concept of self-cultivation by claiming that taste in fashion is acquired rather than inherited at birth. She reported that she had obtained her own fashion taste gradually after having had the opportunity to wear better quality, more expensive clothes for overseas dance performances. Using Shanghai as an example of a cosmopolitan, high-quality urban area, Jin praised the tune-pattern of a group of older Shanghai men—called ‘old clerks’ (laokele)—who were at least 70 or 80 years old and had Western cultural or life experiences.

To demonstrate her point, a short video was shown on the TV screen. The video featured Jin’s co-host Xiao Nan acting the part of a 78-year-old Chinese character with the English name of Charles, an ‘overseas returnee’ (haigui) who had studied in the United States at the age of 18. A narrator described Charles as a cosmopolitan Chinese citizen living in Shanghai, who combined high-quality Chinese and Western lifestyles. For example, he was presented as living in a ‘Stone Gate’ (shikumen) building, referring to an architectural style famous since the 1860s for combining traditional Chinese and modern Western architectural elements, and was said to enjoy applying styling wax to his hair in the morning, as many Shanghai natives do. He was reported to wear exquisite Western-style suits and dress shoes that he polishes to a high shine every day, to listen and dance to jazz music daily and to prefer British-style breakfast and afternoon tea.

After the video, Jin mentioned another person she had met who embodied a similar kind of cosmopolitan tune-pattern—the late entrepreneur and famous

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169 Nowadays, many renovated ‘Stone Gate’ architectures in Shanghai are unique in their postcolonial combination of high-end Western and Eastern cultural elements and often serve middle- and upper-class residents. For a detailed discussion on this topic, see Paul Goldberger, ‘Shanghai Surprise: The Radical Quaintness of the Xintiandi District’, *The New Yorker* (26 December 2005) <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/12/26/shanghai-surprise>, accessed 1 January 2016.
‘red capitalist’ (*hongse zibenjia*) Rong Yiren who had lived in Beijing. The term ‘red capitalist’ refers to wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs who work closely with the Chinese Communist Party and make significant contributions to the industrialisation, capitalisation and transnational economic expansion of Mainland China. This explicit eulogising of the Chinese upper class as high-quality capitalists further reveals the show’s promotion of the state’s postsocialist reforms, its combined neoliberal and cosmopolitan ideologies and its intentional downplaying of rising wealth disparities through its emphasis on individual quality during contemporary China’s global capitalisation and economic reforms.

This propagandistic framing of tune-pattern as a manifestation of neoliberalism and cosmopolitanism was furthered in Jin’s narration of her experience travelling to South Korea as an invited modern dance master. Jin reported that, while waiting to clear customs after landing in South Korea, she witnessed a Korean customs officer’s annoyance with a group of unruly and loud Chinese tourists. As an ethnic Korean Chinese, Jin sympathised with the Korean officer’s complaints (expressed in Korean) about the Chinese tourists’ bad behaviour. However, she was soon subjected to the officer behaving in an obstructive manner towards her after he found out she was from China, even though she was acting respectfully as a good Chinese citizen and adhering to social protocols. The officer, assuming Jin did not understand Korean, said ‘Chinese people are so annoying!’ Jin was infuriated by the officer’s discriminatory behaviour and decided to fight for her rights and save the face of her nation. Jin proudly informed the audience that she had never feared communicating in English, due to the years she spent training and working as a modern dancer in the United States and Europe before returning to China for her transition. Thus, she decided to ‘elevate the conversation to an international level’ by confronting the officer and later filing complaints in English about his racist behaviour. Reasoning with the officer in English, she stressed that she was a prestigious, talented dancer invited by the South Korean government to teach and perform in South Korea.

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Proudly, Jin told the audience that, as a Chinese citizen who had mastered multiple foreign languages, she dealt with the discrimination properly in a tone that was neither aggressive nor conciliatory, which she claimed was another way of showcasing tune-pattern. The officer later apologised to her upon her request, and she was relieved to be treated with dignity and respect by Korean television reporters and fans as a world-renowned dancer. This part of Jin’s monologue further consolidated her as a cosmopolitan Chinese citizen who dissociated herself from the ‘low-quality’ Chinese tourists and won the respect of the Korean people through a combination of her linguistic proficiencies, professionalism, good manners and her high quality (*suzhi*). 

The monologue ended with one of the most widely circulated moments of the episode, which complicated Jin’s self-presentation as a high-quality Chinese citizen. Jin reported another transcultural experience that occurred on an Air China flight from Europe to China. On the flight, she observed a good-looking female Chinese flight attendant acting cordially to foreigners, yet rudely and condescendingly to Chinese-speaking passengers. Jin parodied the distinctive ways the flight attendant asked the passengers what they would like to drink in both English and Chinese. When the attendant asked rudely for Jin’s drink order in Chinese, Jin pretended not to understand Chinese and responded in English with, ‘Sorry, I do not understand’. This led the attendant to think that Jin was a non-Chinese-speaking Asian passenger. The attendant immediately responded politely in English, ‘Oh! Would you like something to drink? Coffee, tea or Coca-Cola?’, upon which Jin quickly rolled her eyes at the attendant and exclaimed in a heavy Northeastern Chinese accent, ‘Orange juice!’ (*cheng zhi’er*!).

This joke references a common linguistic and class-based cultural phenomenon in contemporary cosmopolitan China that has been addressed in existing research. China studies scholar Geng Song notes that ‘the construction of the cosmopolitan Self [in modern China] is part and parcel of a “middle-class” lifestyle’ that is often closely associated with non-Chinese
cultural elements. In this sense, the ability to speak English, which also implies a superior or foreign educational background, and to socialise with foreigners, especially Westerners, plays an important role in the formation of Chinese citizens’ cosmopolitan subjectivities. In contrast, Chinese people who cannot understand foreign languages are often disdained and discriminated against by cosmopolitan fellow citizens for their apparent lack of global knowledge and international connections and their low-brow status. This discriminatory culture contributes to a widespread Chinese social behaviour—flattering foreigners and bowing to non-Chinese cultures (chongyang meiwei) while looking down on local cultures and ‘people from the provinces … [who] are lacking in cosmopolitan qualities’. As revealed in the ‘orange juice case’ on TJS, the Northeastern Chinese accent is often deemed less ‘standard’ and ‘decent’ than the Mandarin Chinese spoken in metropolitan Chinese cities such as Beijing. It is a stereotype associated with the relatively low level of modernisation and economic development of Northeastern China. As a Chinese citizen born in a major city of that region, Jin’s mastery of both English and Northeastern Chinese dialects make her an ideal, legitimate Chinese citizen who incorporates both local and Western cultural elements while daring to chastise the improperly cosmopolitan Chinese citizens who do not respect other Chinese people. This part of the monologue was so well received that after the broadcast, the phrase ‘orange juice’ exclaimed in a heavy Northeastern accent became one of the most popular Chinese catchphrases, especially after many celebrities posted online videos of their own mocking of this discriminatory phenomenon.

In the premiere episode of TJS, Jin concluded her monologue by answering a viewer’s question on whether lower-class workers could embody tune-pattern.

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173 Song, ‘Imaging the Other’, p. 111.
Jin cynically responded that Chinese people whose salaries barely reach the poverty line should give up on the idea of obtaining tune-pattern. These final, bitter comments again downplayed the economic hardships and structural inequalities that many marginal groups face in contemporary Chinese society.

Throughout the episode, especially in her accounts of her personal experiences and her responses to viewer questions, Jin constantly framed Shanghai culture and transcultural experiences within a localised neoliberal discourse of self-making (making yourself high suzhi) to downplay social tensions and struggles. In so doing, she transformed the narrative strategy of ‘speaking bitterness’ into a similar, yet more entertaining and sensational cultural practice of ‘speaking bitterly’ to cynically criticise certain sociocultural problems, legitimise gender and social inequalities, and distinguish and valorise cosmopolitan, patriotic Chinese citizens from other—less ‘desirable’—groups. She offered a wide array of examples, mentalities and strategies to help less powerful individuals to transform themselves into high-quality, respectable, desirable citizens, although this was often at the expense of minimising the deeply rooted political-ideological problems and the difficulties faced by certain groups of sociocultural minorities in an authoritarian, heteropatriarchal society. In the next section, I extend my discussion of how TJS, though problematic in its propagandistic, heteropatriarchal and nationalist mentalities, did sometimes facilitate a flow of queer meanings and pleasures in a mainstream media space.

5.3. A ‘post-trans’ queer talk show

Discussing DeGeneres as a TV personality who has gradually transformed her public image to ‘post-gay’, especially on her own daytime talk show, Reed argues that Ellen often ‘sidestep[s] the challenge that lesbian subjectivity makes to the heterosexual contract’, which allows DeGeneres to act as ‘a lesbian without being lesbian, or a post-gay lesbian’. According to Reed, during this seemingly assimilating process, Ellen styles itself as a programme aimed at ‘stay-at-home moms and other people who are at home

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176 Ibid., p. 32.
during the day, and thus is not exactly queer’.\textsuperscript{177} Albeit at the expense of ‘radical political intervention’, \textit{Ellen} facilitates not only DeGeneres’s televisual communication to ‘multiple spectatorial communities … [but also] her very presence [on TV, which in fact] challenges heteronormativity’.\textsuperscript{178} To a certain degree, this negotiative post-gay position of DeGeneres was also carefully appropriated and revised by Jin on \textit{TJS}, though within more complicated, interconnected discourses on Chinese patriotism in a transcultural context.

Following Reed’s logic, I regard Jin’s manipulation of her own position as a trans female public figure on \textit{TJS} as ‘post-trans’. On the one hand, the ‘post-trans’ appeal of \textit{TJS} enabled Jin’s ‘normalised’ presence on TV as a traditionally defined feminine, feminist, successful Chinese wife and mother. This normalisation of her female subject position in mainstream Chinese media allowed her to speak to, and for, a wide cross section of audience groups. It also made \textit{TJS} less, if at all, about the human rights and politics of Chinese LGBTQ groups, even though it was hosted by the most famous trans figure in modern Chinese history. On the other hand, paradoxically, Jin’s ‘post-trans’ position opened up a productive queer arena to provoke queer sentiments, connotations and tensions. This queer aspect of the show is epitomised in one of the most popular episodes of \textit{TJS} broadcast in 2017, featuring the Taiwanese American pop idol Fei Xiang (Kris Phillips).

Born in 1960s Taipei, Fei is a biracial Chinese-speaking male singer of mixed parentage (American and Chinese). He is well known in Mainland China and Taiwan for his attractive looks, exoticised and eroticised biracial identity, and charming performances during the late 1980s (fig. 2.9). In the 1990s, after rising to stardom in Mainland China, he decided to move to New York City to start a new career as a Broadway singer. Since then, he has received limited media exposure in Chinese-speaking societies. However, during his silent years in the Chinese entertainment industry, gay rumours circulated about Fei and another renowned Taiwanese male icon, Liu Wen-cheng. Some news and

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., p. 33.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid.
personal blogs posted insider stories and pictures showing that the two had dated and lived together in New York City for years.\textsuperscript{179} Fei has never publicly come out and has often insisted to the media that he and Liu are just good friends. Nevertheless, the ‘gay’ connotations surrounding him were subtly alluded to and played with during his appearance on \textit{TJS}.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure.png}
\caption{A poster of Fei for the debut of his first album produced by EMI in Taiwan in 1982, which exemplifies his charming, biracial look.\textsuperscript{180}}
\end{figure}

On 2 February 2017, \textit{TJS} featured Fei as a special guest in its ‘Spring Festival’ episode celebrating the 2017 Chinese Lunar New Year. In this episode, the show’s format, style and segments were different from other episodes, which opened up a visual-cultural space for queer allusions to Fei’s sexuality. At the beginning of the episode, Jin walked up to the stage with Fei, who wore a gold disco jacket and a black T-shirt with silver sequins. During the opening casual chat with Fei, Jin expressed to the audience her great admiration for Fei since her teenage years. When explaining the very first time they met in person in New York City to the audience, Jin told of her brief, awkward

\textsuperscript{179} For example, see http://changepw.com/?p=34994.
\textsuperscript{180} The picture is from Fei’s Wikipedia page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fei_Xiang.
encounter with Fei in a leather purse shop where she was working in Greenwich Village. Emphasising that she had a lot in common with Fei, Jin invited Fei to the signature red armchairs for the celebrity interview segment.

On the surface, this opening segment did not involve any sexuality-related topics. Yet, there were a great many queer connotations and flavours flowing through Jin’s brief conversation and interaction with Fei. For example, Jin has admitted numerous times in public interviews that before she came back to China for her gender reassignment surgery, she struggled and self-identified as a gay male. The years she referred to when she had a crush on Fei overlap with the period when she identified as gay. Meanwhile, queer-sensitive audience members might have noticed that Greenwich Village (emphasised twice in Jin’s narration in the short opening sequence) is famous for its revolutionary role in the gay liberation movement in the United States. More interestingly, the usual executive desk and chair setting was removed from the set in this episode. Instead, the two red armchairs were positioned in the middle of the screen during the celebrity interview section, with a traditional Chinese tea table between them (fig. 2.10). This changed setting may have reminded some viewers of the setting of *Ellen*. The changes not only shortened the physical and psychological distance between Jin and her guest, Fei, but also further suggested the queerness that the two have in common by positioning them as equals on stage. Furthermore, the segment contained several queerly tinted visual-cultural elements that heavily referenced Western LGBTQ subcultures, such as the leather purse shop and the shining, unnecessarily flamboyant costume worn by Fei.

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181 For example, the famous Stonewall riot that led to the American gay liberation movement happened in 1969 in a Greenwich Village inn called the Stonewall Inn.
Jin began the interview segment by introducing Fei’s first performance at 1987’s Spring Festival Gala in Mainland China. Jin told the audience that after Fei’s sensational (sexy) singing and dancing at the Gala, many young boys, including herself (or pre-trans, himself), began to copy Fei’s hairstyle and look. This further implied that Jin identified with Fei when she self-identified as a gay male instead of a trans female. The conversation then shifted to why Fei, as a Taiwanese American, was the first celebrity allowed to perform across the Taiwan Strait in the late 1980s. Fei explained that his mother was a Beijing native who went to Taiwan to escape the war and lost contact with her family in Beijing for 40 years from the late 1940s. After the lines of communication between Taiwan and Mainland China reopened in the late 1980s, he and his mother visited their family in Beijing, and finally reunited with their ‘motherland’. This pro-reunification sentiment was expressed in a famous song performed by Fei on the show, *The Cloud of Hometown (Guxiang de yun)*, which expresses the homesickness of overseas Chinese people. During the performance, a series of close-up shots captured Jin’s highly emotional, enchanted facial expressions. Jin commented after the performance that, as a Chinese person who has lived in Western countries, she can certainly sympathise with Fei’s song and his strong feelings of homesickness.

As the interview continued, Fei told of the romance between his Midwestern American father and his Beijing-born mother in 1950s Taipei. Fei attributed
their love to the passion of his ‘authentic’ American father for learning about ‘authentic’ Chinese culture from his mother. He emphasised that it was the appeal of Chinese culture embodied by his mother that bound his parents together so closely. After showing a few old pictures of his parents (fig. 2.11), Jin commented on one picture of Fei’s mother in a cheongsam, applauding his mother’s ‘authentic’ Chinese identity. As Jin explained, only a typical Chinese woman, such as Fei’s mother, could make a cheongsam so beautiful. Through these patriotic, self-Orientalist framings of a gendered Chineseness during the interview, Fei was presented as a hybrid cosmopolitan figure who signifies the global significance of ‘genuine’ Chinese culture and identity as well as Western people’s admiration for China. This self-contradictory, cross-racial, cosmopolitan identity of Fei embodies a desiring China that is imagined, longed for and celebrated by Caucasian Westerners, Mainland Chinese citizens and diasporic Chinese people.

Figure 2.11: An old picture of Fei’s parents shown on TJS in which Fei’s mother wears a Chinese cheongsam

Accompanying this framing of Fei’s hybrid identity in terms of ‘desiring China’, Fei’s cosmopolitanism was also carefully deployed to justify his queerly connoted single status. After highlighting the Chineseness of Fei’s family, the conversation soon shifted back to Fei’s singledom. Jin said that she was curious to know what romantic encounters Fei has had as a single,
charming male star over fifty. She showed the audience a picture of Fei taken on vacation in Tahiti that he later shared online and praised his good looks. To some queer-sensitive viewers, Fei’s posture in the picture may have looked like that of one of the half-naked, muscle bound men often found in gay magazines (fig. 2.12). Along with the audience’s laughter in the studio, Fei explained that (he posed this way because) he really likes Tahiti, just like Marlon Brando, who also liked the place and married a girl he met there.

Figure 2.12: A picture of Fei in Tahiti, which was shared online by Fei himself. His hyper-masculine, half-naked upper body and intimate facial expressions in the picture, to some viewers, might carry some gay connotations.

On the one hand, this awkward response enables Fei to discursively ‘straighten’ his sexuality and single status, because it implies that Fei has heterosexual marital fantasies about Tahitian girls. On the other hand, the self-comparison with Brando, whether intentionally or not, associates him with one of the most famous queer icons in Hollywood history, who was said to have heavily influenced lesbian culture in the United States since the 1950s.182 In the conversation that followed, Fei told Jin and the audience that the most unforgettable romantic experience he ever had was lying peacefully beside another person on a Gondola at midnight in Venice. After hearing this, co-host Xiao Nan suddenly jumped into the conversation and asked who the person lying beside Fei was. Jin immediately stared at Xiao Nan, saying with

a firm tone, ‘Of course, the person he loves!’ (Dangranshi taai de ren). This reaction successfully shifted the conversation away in order to avoid revealing the gender or name of the person in Fei’s story.

At the end of the episode, after a long interview segment, Jin asked to perform a song with Fei. Fei agreed and said that he would like to make the performance ‘international superstar-class’ (guoji juxing ban), just like the Mariah Carey’s disastrous one in Times Square for the 2017 New Year celebration (fig. 2.13). He invited Xiao Nan to imitate Mariah Carey’s background dancers with him while Jin sang a traditional Chinese Lunar New Year song. In the next shot, Xiao Nan walked up to the stage in a different costume and told the audience that Fei hand-made his costume, sewing the sequins on himself. The episode ended with a song and dance performance during which Fei and Xiao Nan held large, white, cabaret-style feather fans (figs. 2.14 and 2.15). Jin explained to the audience that this style signified their celebration of the Chinese (Lunar) Year of the Rooster.183

Figure 2.13: A picture of Carey’s new year performance at Times Square

183 The animal sign of the 2017 Chinese Lunar Year is the Rooster.
The final, queerly loaded performance, featuring flamboyant hand-made costumes and drag queen-style dancing, epitomises TJS’s queer referencing and provocation. The show, as well as Jin herself, constantly and carefully appropriated LGBTQ-related visual and sociocultural elements and presented these images and performances in a theatrical (thus fictional) or Westernised manner. This maneuver subtly invites queer readings and incites viewing pleasure among certain audience groups, such as Chinese gay men and drag queens, who have global queer knowledge of the significant roles of Brando (as the subject of fantasies for gay men and drag king impersonators) and Carey (as a popular diva for drag queen impersonators) in the history of Western LGBTQ and drag cultures. At the same time, it discursively protects the heteronormative, patriarchal centrism of mainstream Chinese public
culture to create a fantasy of a chaotic, barbarian and even immoral Western world where global gay icons, such as Brando and Carey, are queerly imitated and interpreted. In addition, by strategically incorporating and mediating the patriotic image of China as a global power and the cultural pride and longing of diasporic Chinese people in this queer episode, Fei, a possibly gay star about whom numerous gay rumours have been circulated was reconfigured as an exemplar of desirable (diasporic) Chinese subject. Ultimately, a contradictory queer dimension of *TJS* was carved out, played with, but eventually trivialised and folded back into a cosmopolitan, China-centric rhetoric. This uniquely Chinese queer-glocalist twist situated in China’s heteronormative, patriarchal talk TV culture was enabled and achieved through Jin’s combined, contradictory on-screen persona as a cosmopolitan, post-trans, patriotic, quasi-feminist talk show host.

6. Conclusion

This chapter uses *TJS* as a case study to examine the contradictory ways in which a Chinese trans woman tactically used her intertwined sociocultural, familial and marital roles to navigate the heteronormative, patriarchal system and public culture in contemporary Chinese society. My close readings of some of the show’s sequences uncover its ‘speaking bitterly’ and ‘post-trans’ appeal. I reveal that the ambiguous yet productive ways that Jin oriented her philosophy around proper Chinese womanhood and cultural citizenship on the show were often based on intertwined logics of state-promoted heteropatriarchy, nationalism, patriotism, neoliberalism and cosmopolitanism. In this sense, Jin, as a media figure, was able to critique certain social problems, provide survival strategies for marginalised groups, and open up queer possibilities in mainstream normative cultures (through *both* her own presence in normative media and public spaces *and* the queer arena of the show initiated and mediated by her). Similar to DeGeneres’s ‘post-gay’ position on the talk show *Ellen*, the biased and normative ‘bitter’ talking of Jin showcased her ‘post-trans’ position in the mainstream Chinese TV industry. This position paradoxically enabled *TJS*, as a globally formatted TV programme, to fuse local and Western televisual-cultural elements to mediate queer and feminist voices in a cosmopolitan, ‘desiring China’
framework. Ultimately, this chapter argues that, drawing on both local and global televisual-cultural knowledge, the show downplayed the severe social problems in contemporary China, turning the focus of these struggles to individuals’ self-cultivation as desirable Chinese citizens able to carry China to the centre of a globalised world. At the same time, by incorporating glocalised queer cultural elements and strategies, the show also carved out a limited space to express the typically silenced desires and problems of marginalised groups.

At midnight on 30 August 2017, on her Weibo page, Jin thanked her audience for their support and their love for the show and wrote that they ‘would meet again someday’ (houhuiyouqi). Later, Dragon TV officially confirmed the temporary cancellation of TJS, which, according to the station, was for the purposes of an internal adjustment of the show’s content. On 2 September 2017, Jin replied to numerous questions from her Weibo followers on the reason for her show’s cancellation. According to Jin, the cancellation was a direct result of TJS’s high rating. She claimed that she and TJS were set up by ‘jealous villains’ (xiaoren). To date, TJS has not been revived. Meanwhile, the well-received heterosexual matchmaking show, The Chinese-Style Dating (Zhongguo Shi Xiangqin; Shanghai Dragon TV, China, 2016-2017), originally hosted by Jin, was reformatted. In the latest season, aired in 2018, with only slight changes to its format and content, the show, hosted by the 63 years old male actor Zhang Guoli, was renamed The Chinese New Dating (Zhongguo Xin Xiangqin). The sudden cancellation of Jin’s talk show and other programmes points to the simultaneous ambiguity and instability of both the Chinese TV industry and its censorship system, which temporarily allows spaces for queer, quasi-feminist moments yet is ultimately subject to the state’s ideological, political and economic regulations. This point is elaborated upon in the next chapter on the emergence and 10-year evolution of tomboyish stardom in China’s post-2000 reality singing competition shows.

Chapter Three

Queer, yet never lesbian: backward glances at the reality TV singing competition Super Voice Girl

1. Introduction

According to Annette Hill, reality TV gradually emerged in the West towards the end of the 20th century as a hybrid, small-budget TV genre that combines the genres of information, documentary, soap opera and entertainment. Hill refers to this TV genre as ‘a catch-all category that includes a wide range of entertainment programmes about real people’. Early successful and globally renowned Western reality TV franchises include Big Brother, Survivor, Pop Idol (ITV, UK, 2001-2003), Fame Academy and The Apprentice (NBC, USA, 2004-2017), all of which have been widely adapted in other parts of the world. Due to the wide popularity of some reality TV formats, such as those of Idol and Survivor, a large body of Anglophone research, including studies by Graeme Turner, has developed that identifies reality TV as a transnationally important mediating site featuring hybrid formats, high profitability and the manufacture of celebrities from ‘ordinary’ people.

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2 Ibid.
3 Due to the large number of the shows all over the world that have adapted these reality TV formats, I only list some famous examples and titles in the origin production nations here.
As Chinese culture scholar Daria Berg records, the Chinese translation of reality TV, *zhenren xiu*, was coined by a Mainland China-based media scholar Hong Yin in 2000 following the global success of *Big Brother*.\(^5\) According to Berg, Yin’s translation of the term literally means ‘real person show’ in Chinese, which denotes a category of ‘commercialized spectacle’ that mixes documentary and fictional televisual styles.\(^6\) Michael Keane’s 2004 study also discusses this mixing of factual and fictional features of Chinese reality TV:

the Chinese reality television ‘show’ is a descendant of the documentary form. The documentary as propaganda was the staple of Chinese broadcasting throughout the development of Chinese television, and this predominance of factual television ensured that its reception was bound to suffer when confronted by the emergence of entertainment genres and a desire on the part of producers to capture audiences. The documentary was left with no alternative but to redefine its relationship with the viewer or be banished to rarely viewed timeslots and channels.\(^7\)

M. Keane argues that, for this context-specific reason, Chinese reality TV emerged in the early 2000s mostly in the form of ‘reality game shows’, which ‘represent the blurring of definitions among factual television, quiz, and game formats’.\(^8\) Berg also states that

for Chinese audiences the appeal of reality shows lies in the combination of indigenous and transnational elements of popular culture, and the play on ‘real’ (*zhen* 真) and ‘nonreal’ (*jia* 假), a literary tease familiar from traditional Chinese fiction, transposed into the contemporary context of globalizing entertainment culture.\(^9\)

Besides this legacy of often propagandistic documentary media and the tendency to represent a negotiated ‘reality’ rooted in today’s Chinese reality

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\(^8\) Ibid.

TV, Berg also notes that Yin’s original interpretation of this TV genre understands it as ‘a documentary-cum-comedy with seven elements: voluntary participants, audience involvement, competition, rules for elimination and selection, rules for time and space, on-the-spot documentary, and post-production editing’. Ran Lin notes that the word zhen (real) also means ‘pure’ or ‘innocent’ in the Chinese language and that the word xiu (show) denotes ‘outstanding’ or ‘elegant yet not worldly’ people or things. Coupling the two words together, this translation not only refers to performances of real people on TV but also connotes the selection and/or transformation of seemingly ordinary people to reveal their particular talents. Berg adds that ‘the character xiu also alludes to xuanxiu 选秀, talent shows with voting mechanisms’. In this sense, this popular Chinese translation partly reveals official discourses on developing and regulating the ‘positive’ (connoted by the word xiu) influences of reality TV on Chinese public culture and society. According to Berg, the formats of contemporary Chinese reality TV ‘cover the main international reality TV subgenres of Big Brother-style documentaries, American Idol-style elimination game and talent shows, and Extreme Makeover-style self-improvement shows, but also “educational reality shows” … targeted at middle-school students’.

The rise of reality TV as both a national popular cultural phenomenon and the most lucrative TV genre in 21st-century China has been underpinned by postsocialist economic-political transformations. As discussed in the previous two chapters, the historical trajectory of the Chinese TV industry, including its government-endorsed marketisation and industrialisation since the late 1970s, marks TV’s transformation to a commercialised, entertainment-centred cultural arena that has nevertheless been persistently subjected to top-down surveillance and shaped by political and economic

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11 Ran Lin, ‘A Review of Music Reality TV Programmes in China’, Music Communication 4 (2015), p. 110. In recent years, the Chinese word ‘xiu’ has also been used as a glocalised alternative for the English word ‘show’. Therefore, it also means ‘performance’ or ‘show’ in the Chinese context.
13 Ibid.
forces. After China’s practicing of ‘reform and opening-up’ (gaige kaifang) in the 1990s and the advent of the globalist, consumerist age of 2000s, the monopoly on mass media held by the state broadcaster, CCTV, was increasingly threatened. Its highly politicised, elitist entertainment was challenged by a diversity of variety shows produced by provincial TV stations that have continued to compete with it. Among these shows, reality singing competition shows have received the most attention and acclaim.

As argued by some Chinese media scholars, such as Bingchun Meng, Ling Yang and Yin, this form of reality talent shows has not only been favoured by provincial TV stations but were also once largely supported by the government due to its highly interactive and participatory features, low production costs, short production cycle and capability to represent diverse groups of people. Especially after the increasing popularisation of the Internet and digital media in Mainland China in the early 2000s, the growing convergence of interactive and traditional media platforms has further resulted in several waves of transformation and revival of reality talent shows in China over the past decade. This is particularly true for Idol-formatted reality singing competitions in China. These shows often feature ordinary people of various gendered and classed identities, manufacturing celebrities and encouraging audience participation through interactive new media.

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Particularly, the text-message voting feature and the online interactive platforms of the shows—promotional and profit-generating strategies borrowed and revised from foreign *Idol* shows and other reality talent programmes—greatly encouraged large numbers of Chinese viewers and fans to actively participate in the shows by selecting and supporting their favourite idols.

At the same time, in China’s increasingly globalised media cultural environment, its TV entertainment programmes, especially those produced by provincial stations that are less subject to direct, rigid political-ideological controls than those produced by CCTV, have exemplified a ‘depoliticising’ discourse in their production and broadcasting.\(^\text{20}\) Media scholar Yuezhi Zhao regards this ‘depoliticising’ strategy as a manifestation of the government’s ‘soft power’, which involves ‘downplaying or even explicitly suppressing ideological differences in the global symbolic arena and focusing on image building instead’.\(^\text{21}\) While TV was considered the ‘mouthpiece and ideological instrument’ of the party-state in the socialist period,\(^\text{22}\) its ‘depoliticisation’ has epitomised the intersection of ‘state, industry, elite and popular interest’ in the postsocialist era.\(^\text{23}\)

One notable case is the provincial TV station, Hunan TV (HTV), which, in 2003, branded itself as ‘the first entertainment channel in China’ (*zhongguo diyi yule pindao*).\(^\text{24}\) Since then, it has produced many high-profile entertainment variety TV shows targeting younger Chinese audiences,
including *Super Voice Girl* (*Chaoji Nüsheng; SVG* hereafter), the Idol-inspired reality singing competition show firstly produced and broadcast in 2004.²⁵ Among the wide variety of reality singing competition shows in China, *SVG* (2004–2006, 2009, 2011, 2016) is considered one of the most sensational, profitable and long-lived reality programmes in Chinese TV history. According to Jing Wu and Chunchun Hu, the show represented ‘the starting point of contemporary Chinese mass entertainment culture’ (*zhongguo yuele yuannian dansheng biaozhi*).²⁶

*SVG* was a reality singing contest with no audition fee and few requirements regarding participants’ personal and professional backgrounds.²⁷ It only permitted cis-female participants but, from its second season (2005) on, manufactured many gender-nonnormative reality TV icons. These queer *SVG* stars were mostly young women with masculine or androgynous personas or cross-dressing looks. They could easily be identified as ‘tomboyish’ girls in the Mainland Chinese context, which, as I discuss in Chapter One on the female gender history of modern China, is a commonly seen and recognisable masculine gender identity for Chinese young women but not necessarily a sociocultural signifier for lesbianism in the context of contemporary China.²⁸ Moreover, in response to the diversity of female images represented on the show, some Chinese media scholars, such as Xin Huang, Miaoju Jian and Chang-de Liu, have described *SVG* as representative of ‘a new wave of

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²⁵ The show’s Chinese title literally means ‘a girl(s) with super (excellent or powerful) voice’. It was also referred to as ‘Super Girl’, or ‘Super Girls’ Voice’ in some existing English-language media commentaries and academic publications. Yet, to differentiate the show from the more recent American superhero TV series *Supergirl* (CBS, USA, 2015–), I use *Super Voice Girl* (*SVG*) to refer to the show in this thesis.


²⁷ Since 2006, due to the revised regulations on talent shows issued by the official media censors, *SVG* participants need to be eighteen years of age or older. For details, see [https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%B6%85%E7%BA%A7%E5%A5%B3%E5%A3%B0/2689](https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%B6%85%E7%BA%A7%E5%A5%B3%E5%A3%B0/2689).

Chinese feminism’ or a Chinese form of ‘democratic entertainment’, ‘grassroots democracy’ or ‘aesthetic public sphere’.  

In this chapter, I examine the emergence and evolution of SVG queer female stardom between 2005 and 2016. I contextualise this boom of gender-nonnormative female TV stars within the depoliticising discourse of Chinese TV entertainment—particularly reality singing competitions—adapted from and mixing Western and East Asian reality TV formats and pop cultures. In particular, I identify a depoliticisation (or de-lesbianisation) of gender-nonnormative women on reality TV and trace a Mainland Chinese-specific zhongxing (meaning neutral gender or sex) pop culture that has been celebrated in Idol-style reality singing contests produced by provincial stations in the new millennium.

It should be noted that the Chinese term zhongxing has been commonly employed in the promotional materials, official media accounts and pop media reports of many Chinese reality talent shows. The term has also been used by participants, viewers and fans to refer to the queer images, styles and personas shown in the programmes. However, as I explicate later in this chapter, the represented ‘reality’ of reality TV, or in Brain Winston’s words, its practice of ‘claiming the real’, significantly complicates this Mainland version of zhongxing culture and distinguishes it from the versions seen in

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30 Although it originated from reality singing competitions, there has been a growing of Chinese TV dramas featuring this form of zhongxing culture and images in more recent years.
Hong Kong and Taiwanese music, TV and celebrity industries.\(^{31}\) In order to highlight the unique ‘depoliticising’ discourse in Mainland Chinese zhongxing pop culture, I use the terms androgyny and androgynous (or in more specific cases, tomboyish or masculine) instead to describe norm-disruptive gendered personas and practices on Mainland Chinese TV and in public culture generally. Using the transformation and revival of SVG and its queer celebrity culture in the past decade as a case study, I problematise this conceptualisation of zhongxing culture. By questioning the too-often-assumed sociocultural and political implications of SVG androgynous reality TV stars for Chinese LGBTQ groups, I reveal that the show’s queer glocalisation of reality TV formats, conditioned by Mainland Chinese and inter-Asian public and popular cultural discourses on androgyny, has led to a disassociation (thus, a loss of social-political significance) of these gender-nonnormative female representations from politically charged lesbian identifications and realities in Mainland Chinese (off-screen) society.

In the following sections, I first discuss the dual processes of depoliticisation in contemporary Chinese TV, which is, on the one hand, devoid of political propagandistic elements and, on the other, imbued with official ideologies. I then provide a brief overview of the history, development and ideological function of Chinese reality singing competition shows adapted from Chinese and foreign TV and pop cultures. Furthermore, I offer an examination of SVG’s ‘de-realised’ and ‘depoliticised’ construction of its queer celebrity personas. I also discuss some of its gender-nonnormative celebrities’ negotiations with the sociocultural implications of female gender and sexuality in off-screen Chinese society. In doing so, I reveal the ways in which the show’s queer dimension has been opened up, yet also depoliticised and commercialised through the creation of a ‘perverse matrix’, a revised heteronormative gender/sex system epitomised in the burgeoning Mainland Chinese zhongxing pop culture.

\(^{31}\) Brian Winston, Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited (London: British Film Institute, 1995).
This matrix includes certain nonnormative gender identities and practices of desire yet negates and delegitimises nonnormative sexual identifications. In order to explore this perverse matrix in relation to SVG, I pay particular attention to the diverse televisual-cultural techniques that SVG has reformulated from Western reality TV (and that of other East Asian pop cultures) and creatively revised over the years in accordance with the government’s constantly changing political and ideological regulations on entertainment media. These techniques include the constant modification and hybridisation of themes, competition formats, narrative styles and segments that serve to reframe and adjust its representations of ‘female masculinity’—one of many ‘alternative masculinities’ that manifest a continuum of various masculine traits and identities embodied or enacted by cis females, such as tomboyism and butchness.\textsuperscript{32}

According to queer scholar Judith Halberstam, the definitions and calibration of female masculinity are often socioculturally and racially modelled.\textsuperscript{33} That is, the standard to define or judge whether a woman is masculine or feminine is context-specific. Different sociocultural contexts might have diverse gauges for categorising, recognising and measuring gender traits. For instance, the standards held by upper-class Caucasian groups might not be applicable to the gender culture of middle-class East Asian people. In line with Halberstam’s point, my examination of SVG highlights the glocalised, thus heterosexually legitimised, form of female masculinity on the show. I question SVG’s function in representing previously invisible, ‘authentic’ sociocultural minorities and ameliorating off-screen normative society through an analysis of the show’s reconfiguration of the ‘dual markers of both reality and fantasy’.\textsuperscript{34} I argue that the show merged a wide array of TV formats with East Asian androgynous pop cultures in order to promote a kind of queer female persona. This SVG queer stardom transformed a form of Chinese-specific female masculinity and intimacy into entertaining cultural elements that allowed public validation in a largely heteropatriarchal society.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
This profit-driven queer celebrity culture on reality TV allowed producers, celebrities and fans to actively exploit the ‘performativeness’ of gendered performances and negotiate off-stage reality and on-stage or online fantasy. Thus, the show’s queer female stardom did not necessarily signal improved acceptance and visibility of real-life lesbianism but remained ‘subject to strategic [re]construction and manipulation’ by the media industry and official culture. I explain why SVG’s queer female stardom should not be flattened out as a demonstration of a transculturally applicable form of zhongxing culture.

In the last section of my analysis, I concentrate on SVG’s 2016 season, during which the show became an entirely Internet-based reality show, which was live-streamed in cyberspace. Drawing on scholarly discussions of gender performativity and queer agency in digitised celebrity culture, I reveal that, by perpetuating and complicating the gendered and sexualised presentation and expressions of its celebrities in cyberspace, the 2016 season of SVG became a queer media platform situated within and shaped by a predominantly heterosexual public space, which ultimately showcased the ubiquitous queer potential, desire and power of Chinese media producers, celebrities, viewers and fans.

2. The depoliticisation of TV entertainment

2.1. The politicised Gala on CCTV

The depoliticisation of TV has manifested in diverse ways in contemporary China. In their edited volume on Chinese entertainment TV in the 21st century, Ruoyun Bai and Geng Song reveal the TV industry’s overwhelming preference for ‘entertain[ing] the nation’ rather than explicitly voicing the social-political concerns of the general public in an authoritarian society. Nevertheless, before this wave of Chinese ‘mass entertainment’ (or ‘pop culture for the people’) reality TV occurred in the 2000s, most Chinese variety TV shows of the 1980s and 1990s were produced from a top-down,
elitist perspective and were for the purpose of ‘educating’ the audience through ideological propaganda. ³⁹ For instance, the earliest variety programme to be broadcast nationally in China, *Spring Festival Gala* (*Chunjie Lianhuan Wanhou*, also titled *China’s New Year Gala*; CCTV, China, 1983–present; the *Gala* hereafter), is aired live each year on the eve of the Chinese Lunar New Year (fig. 3.1). Even in more recent years, the show has largely retained this propagandistic style.

![Figure 3.1: A screen capture of the Gala. Most of the dresses of the female hosts and performers are red, while the suits of the male performers and hosts are generally black worn with red accessories.](image)

Starting at 8:00 p.m. on New Year’s Eve, the *Gala* lasts over four hours and includes several major segments of traditional musicals and operas, sitcoms, folk dramas, cross-talks and sketches, pop music performances and poetry readings. Most segments and performances are tinged with propagandistic information on current ‘state ideology’ and generally valorise the nation’s power, prosperity and territorial sovereignty.⁴⁰ The show was considered the most watched TV programme in the world before *SVG* was broadcast in 2005 and has been deemed ‘an indispensable annual cultural ritual for the [Chinese]

³⁹ Wu and Hu, ‘Clear Ambiguity’, p. 68.
people’. To achieve a high rating while remaining a political propagandistic entertainment programme, the Gala deploys a number of televisual-cultural techniques, which present it as a nationalistic media event for ethnic-Chinese families all over the world to celebrate this traditional festival and enjoy the show together.

As shown in Figure 3.1, the Gala’s main live studio is a large auditorium in Beijing with Alhambresque decor. The decoration and the dresses of the female hosts are predominantly red, while the male performers and hosts generally wear black suits with red accessories. The colour red is considered a sign of ‘happiness, success and good fortune’ in traditional Chinese culture. Even in the contemporary era, ‘during weddings, festivals and other celebratory events’, many Chinese-speaking families decorate their homes with red ornaments, wear red clothes and give money or gifts in red envelopes. At the same time, the colour also serves as a highly politicised symbol of the Chinese Communist Party and the nation-state. For instance, the national flag of the People’s Republic of China is red. In this sense, the extensive use of red in the Gala is not only culturally and politically symbolic but also gendered in rigorously binary ways. In this national, politicised entertainment event, women’s bodies and costumes are deployed as sites to display China’s traditional, national and political cultures and to present an image of power, joy and goodwill.

Moreover, the Gala’s live studio audience includes people from diverse sociocultural backgrounds (often visibly apparent from ethnicised, politicised or class-specific outfits) sitting in front of the stage. Several large, round,
antique wooden Chinese dining tables and chairs, which signify a happy reunion of Chinese family members at home, are placed in the front row of the auditorium. Only special guests, such as national model workers (*laomo*) selected by the state and ethnic minority deputies, are allowed to sit at the tables. During the live broadcast, the camera often cuts to the audience laughing, clapping their hands and reacting cheerfully to the performances on the stage. Sometimes, hosts and celebrities leave the stage to interact with the audience (fig. 3.2).

Figure 3.2: A screen capture of the 2017 *Gala*, during which the hostess left the stage to talk to an elderly special guest in the front row.

These setting and stylistic characteristics of the *Gala* can be understood as the ‘co-presence of image and viewer’ discussed by the British media scholar John Ellis in his 1982 seminal book *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*. Ellis argues that broadcast TV has unique forms of representation that create intimacy and familiarity (and thus reduce the ‘separation’) between the televisual image and its viewers. This sociocultural feature of TV differs from the voyeuristic representation and viewing modes of cinema. He notes that

[b]roadcast TV recruits the interest of its viewers by creating a complicity of viewing: the TV look at the events of the world, both documented and imaged, to an audience that is secure at home, relaxing and seeking diversion. Broadcast TV creates a community of address in which viewer and TV institution both look at a world that

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47 Ibid., p. 137.
48 Ibid.
exists beyond them both. So TV is a relay, a kind of scanning apparatus that offers to present the world beyond the familiar and the familial, but to present them in a familiar and familial guise.\textsuperscript{49}

What is particularly relevant in Ellis’s discussion of this ‘co-presence’ is TV’s construction of ‘the community of address’. As Ellis explains, through this feature of TV,

\begin{quote}
[t]he distance between viewer and image is reduced; but a compensatory distance is constructed and separation/between the ‘I’ and ‘you’ of the community of address and the third person outside that it constructs. The ‘they’ that is always implied and often stated in direct address forms becomes an other, a grouping outside the consensus that confirms the consensus.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Ellis uses representations of race on British broadcast TV to illustrate this function of ‘the community of address’. He finds that non-Caucasian groups are often represented as ‘they’ and thus as ‘excluded’, ‘unnatural’ and ‘othered’ ones in British TV representations of ‘the familiar and everyday’ in mainstream society.\textsuperscript{51} In this sense, according to Ellis, the ‘community of address’ is an ‘insidious way’ of facilitating ‘the construction of casual racism’ on British TV.\textsuperscript{52}

The settings and styles of the \textit{Gala} described above combine to create a broadened ‘national community of address’, which unites Chinese-speaking people from all over the world as national subjects who appreciate the culture, history and power of a ‘Greater China’. The \textit{Gala}’s presentation of, and contribution to, this imaginary of a Greater China is constructed through the ‘co-presence’ of on-stage performances, the off-stage live audience and viewers located in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and other diasporic regions. In addition, the display of dining tables in the studio and the use of red in the show combine to create a familiar domestic atmosphere in which all the family members sit together with the elders. This televisual style demonstrates what John Reith, ‘the first director-general of the BBC’,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[49] Ibid., p. 163.
\item[50] Ibid., p. 139.
\item[51] Ibid., pp. 140-141.
\item[52] Ibid., p. 141.
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\end{footnotesize}
identified in 1925 as the social function of public service broadcasting systems in the UK.\(^{53}\) John Keane reports that Reith believed TV broadcasting should function as a national service. It should act as a powerful means of social unity, binding together groups, regions, and classes through the live relaying of national events, ... which had the effect of ‘making the nation as one man’. \(^{54}\)

Keane also notes that in a contemporary European context, ‘this assumption that the public service model is the principal forum which enables the whole nation to talk to itself is sometimes stated explicitly’. \(^{55}\) The Gala’s ‘national community of address’ offers an apt Chinese example of TV’s function of ‘making the nation [which, in this case, includes Chinese-speaking communities all over the world] as one man’. The televisual techniques of the Gala not only reduce the psychological distance between the audience (both in and out of the studio) and the performers but also ‘unite [Chinese-speaking] families into the “imagined community” of the nation’ in and outside of Mainland China. \(^{56}\) In this sense, the show reconfirms the state broadcaster’s role ‘in creating a sense of national identity’. \(^{57}\) Bin Zhao argues this televisual-cultural practice also reflects traditional Chinese Confucianism:

\[\text{[i]n [the Gala], the party has simply found the best opportunity to convey social and ideological messages simultaneously to the wildest audience possible. The Spring Festival Eve can thus be seen as a unique situation in which family are wired via television to the central state. The ancient Confucian “great oneness” ideal of the state governed like one family suddenly appears more real than ever.}\]

However, the cost of constructing this ‘national community of address’ is the creation of invisible groups, who are othered in terms of ethnicity, class, gender and/or sexual orientation, who do not necessarily identify as Chinese citizens and/or are dissatisfied with Han-dominated, heteropatriarchal China-centrism.


\(^{54}\) Ibid. Also see, John Reith, ‘Memorandum of Information on the Scope and Conduct of the Broadcasting Service’ (Caversham: BBC Written Archives, 1925), p. 4.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Lu, ‘Ritual, Television, and State Ideology’, p. 112.


\(^{58}\) Zhao, ‘Popular Family Television’, p. 46.
The *Gala’s* appropriation and synthetisation of traditional Confucian beliefs, the heterosexual, monogamous family structure, ethnocentric ideals (such as the essentialist idea that all ethnic-Chinese people in the world belong to one big ‘Chinese’ family), and the government’s political emphasis on ‘national unity’ were well received by the Chinese audience in the 1980s. This is mainly due to the fact that the show was the first and largest (and, for a long time, also the only) entertainment show that, although highly politicised, targeted the general public in the post-revolutionary era.\(^59\) I will further discuss this interethnic, transcultural co-presence in the next chapter where I explore the queer space opened up through the intersected televisual representations of gender and ethnic minorities in the more recent celebrity impersonation show *Your Face Sounds Familiar*.

### 2.2. The depoliticisation of ‘sensitive’ topics on TV

In 2004, a statement from China’s premier at the time imploring CCTV ‘producers to create more programs focusing on ordinary people’ encouraged CCTV’s launch of the reality singing competition shows *China Dream* (*Mengxiang Zhongguo*, CCTV-2, China, 2004–2006; fig. 3.3) and *Star Avenue* (*Xingguang Dadao*, CCTV-1, China, 2004–present; fig. 3.4).\(^60\) Both shows appropriated and mixed elements from Western talent shows, and were live-broadcast during prime time on weekends and lasted around 90 minutes.\(^61\) Although allegedly featuring ‘ordinary people’ performing onstage, both shows resembled the ‘main melody’ (*zhuxuanlv*; meaning ‘government-sponsored [media information] that serv[es] as tools for both propaganda and entertainment’) style of mainstream CCTV variety shows.\(^62\)

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\(^{59}\) Ibid., and Lu, ‘Ritual, Television, and State Ideology’, p. 112.


\(^{61}\) The airing time for the shows have been constantly changed. Yet they have always been broadcast after 7:30 p.m. of a weekend day.

For instance, both shows tended to emphasise the professionalism and talent of the performers, most of whom had already been trained in formal music academies or performed in public spaces. In doing so, the shows distinguished themselves from SVG and other similar reality singing competitions produced by provincial stations that emphasised entertainment and the grassroots participation of ordinary people without professional training. Moreover, both shows were set in large, luxurious theatre-like live studios. They also constantly incorporated ideological and political materials
and participants’ ‘narratives of good socialists overcoming hardships’. These features combined to distance and exclude young grassroots pop singers and general audiences less interested in professional and ideologically charged performances. These problems soon led to low ratings, and, while *Star Avenue* remains on air, *China Dream* was cancelled in 2007 after its third season.

Interestingly, among the ebbs and flows of reality singing competitions in China since the early 2000s, the trend of representing gender-nonnormative images in this genre has been consistent. In fact, this trend can be traced back to the *Gala*. While serving as the party-state’s propagandistic tool through its entertaining of the Chinese audience, the show has also continually featured cross-gender and cross-dressing performances. Take, for example, one of the most famous Chinese comedians in the 21st century, who rose to stardom by performing in the 2009 *Gala*, Xiao Shenyang (fig. 3.5). As Huike Wen points out, Xiao Shenyang is famous for his talent ‘to ridicule masculine images by wearing women’s clothing and exaggerated makeup and singing, with skill matching that of professional performers, in the high voice with which he was born’. However, this form of sarcastic, queer performance that ridicules Chinese hegemonic male masculinity (which often denigrates men in skirts as sissies and perverts) has been ‘explained’ by him, as well as the *Gala*, as the cultural manifestation of a local Chinese folk art form, *Er’ren Zhuan* (a type of singing-and-dancing duet). This art form has been popular in Northeast China, where Xiao Shenyang was born and previously trained as a performer. Meanwhile, as noted in Wen’s research, Xiao Shenyang’s onstage exhibition of nontraditional masculinities has also been considered artistic expressions and ‘individual choices’. In addition, his queer performance on TV has been ‘compensated’ by the normalised appearances

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65 Ibid., pp. 22-23.
66 Ibid.
of him in mainstream media (e.g., in media interviews or talk shows) as a loving, faithful, masculine husband and father in his personal life.67

Similarly, in the early 2010s, another Chinese male performing artist, Li Yugang has been famous for cross-dressing performances in the Gala (fig. 3.6). As Chengzhou He says, Li’s ‘impersonation of well-known beauties in Chinese history and literature is highly acclaimed both in and outside’ contemporary China.68 Yet, He also finds that Li’s celebrity persona on mainstream media often frames his onstage transgenderism as an artistic and cultural inheritance of the cross-dressing tradition in classical Chinese opera, on the one hand; on the other, his lifestyle in private, personal, off-stage spaces is promoted in mass media as ‘normal’, heterosexual and masculine.69 Another gender studies scholar Huai Bao also notes that it is this strategy to ‘implicate’ the cross-dressing essence of traditional Beijing Opera or local folk arts in cross-dressing performances in order to ‘legitimatised and normalise’ these queer images that wins ‘the support of [Chinese] mainstream

Figure 3.5: A screen capture of the well-received short sketch of the 2009 Gala, in which Xiao Shenyang, in a plaid skirt, played a waiter with an ambiguous gender identity and sarcastic opinions toward money and fame.

67 Ibid.
media (including but not limited to the CCTV)’. In this sense, the representations of cross-dressing, transgender performances and personas in the Gala exemplify what has been discussed by Chinese women’s studies scholar Harriet Evans as contemporary mainstream Chinese gender discourse in which ‘sex and sexuality become components of individual exploration, dissociated from the broader issues of power and justice’.

Figure 3.6: A screen capture of Li Yugang performing the song ‘The New Drunken Concubine’ in the 2012 Gala, adapted from the traditional Chinese Beijing Opera excerpt ‘The Drunken Concubine’ with integrated contemporary pop cultural singing-and-dancing elements.

Besides this depoliticisation of nonnormative gendered performances in CCTV’s often largely politicised variety TV shows, a complicated depoliticising process visible in the 1990s’ Chinese TV dramas produced by both CCTV and provincial stations has been noted by Chinese TV scholar Shenshen Cai. She finds that, since the 2000s, contemporary TV serials have tended to romanticise the social-political upheavals and traumas that occurred during the ten-year Cultural Revolution ‘as a revolutionary nostalgic cultural subgenre’. Cai notes that, during the 1990s, media representations

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of the Cultural Revolution used to be a ‘sensitive’ and ‘negative’ topic ‘for the ruling regime, who wanted to distance the memory of their political mistakes from the public’.  

Nevertheless, along with the state’s marketisation and attempts to shift the general public’s attention ‘to consumption and recreation’, not only were critical reflections on the Cultural Revolution banned from the mass media, but so too were TV shows that portrayed it ‘as romantic and passionate, abounding with courtships, love stories and the simple dramas of everyday life’.  

Cai argues that this reconstruction of collective memories on Chinese TV ‘“de-realized” the identity and history’ of this period. She explains that

[...]these manufactured [historical] realities [by the TV programmes under the surveillance and monitoring of the governing political rhetoric] cater to the demands of the dominant ideological discourse in terms of highlighting certain historical anecdotes and events and intentionally neglecting and concealing others. … Under these circumstances, the once thought-provoking, detailed reflections on the cause and repercussions of the Cultural Revolution have been negated.

In this sense, rather than being devoid of political intention in the use of TV (or in the production of TV entertainment), China’s depoliticisation of TV in fact modifies the media content that used to be considered politically sensitive to entertainment elements that are constructive to the social-political stability of China and the images of its party-state.

Although this chapter does not explore Chinese TV representations of the Cultural Revolution, historical or political TV dramas or variety TV in general, these scholarly discussions on the dual ‘depoliticising’ and ‘re-politicising’ of certain sensitive or censored topics on Chinese TV are

74 Ibid., p. 25. According Cai, the political crackdown in Beijing Tian’anmen in 1989 ‘marked a watershed between moderately liberal political and artistic regulation [since the post-Cultural revolution era in the late 1970s], and tight ideological surveillance and control’ in the postsocialist China. Prior to 1989, some mainstream media images of the Cultural Revolution portrayed this period in critical ways ‘as a dehumanizing and irrational time of political chaos and a disaster that distorted human nature by allowing politics and ideological “correctness” to interfere with personal choices and lives’. For a detailed discussion, see Ibid., pp. 24-25.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., p. 33.
particularly relevant. My investigation focuses on a similar ‘de-realisation’ and negation of the social-political implications of queer female gender, sexuality and relationships on contemporary Chinese TV that are often considered ‘vulgar’ and abnormal by media censors (as discussed in Chapter One).

In particular, in the light of Cai’s conceptualisation of the romanticisation of historical traumas on TV, a similar depoliticisation can be found in earlier prototypes of Chinese reality TV. Two cases in point are the first Chinese reality game show, The Great Challenge for Survival (Shengcun Datiaozhan; Pearl Satellite TV, China, 2000-2005; fig. 3.7),\(^7\) and the first reality TV-style Chinese documentary programme made using digital video cameras, Walking into Shangri-La (Zoujin Xianggelila; Sichuan TV, China, 2001).\(^7\) Both shows were produced by provincial stations and both borrowed and mixed certain generic formulas from Asian and Western reality survival competition shows.\(^8\) As M. Keane notes, instead of simple format cloning, the Chinese shows adopted many elements of foreign reality survival shows and presented a ‘hybridity of formats’.\(^9\) For instance, they often involved the selection of a small number of participants from hundreds of thousands of national volunteers to endure a long, tough journey in an extreme natural environment—such as a deserted island or a mountain—with limited money, time and food. By recording how the participants survived these difficult situations, the shows presented structured challenges that reward certain qualities in the ‘ordinary Chinese public’, such as a strong volition, intense willpower and the ability to endure extreme difficulty and transcend setbacks. At the same time, by documenting beautiful scenes of remote rural areas in China, the shows also televisualised China’s vast territory and abundant

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\(^7\) This show was produced by a Guangdong-based TV station and also said to be inspired by some production elements in a similar show coproduced by a Hong Kong-based television station and a Japan-based TV station. Yet, since its second season, the show had started incorporating a number of stylistic features of the American reality TV programme Survivor (CBS, USA, 2000-) which was imported and aired to the Chinese audience in 2000. For a detailed discussion, see Gengyun Xie and Hong Chen, ‘Chinese Reality TV Programmes Development Report’, people.com (18 April 2006) <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40628/4309362.html>, accessed 20 September 2018.

\(^8\) Ibid.

resources, with the aim of creating a sense of cultural and national pride in their audiences. Ultimately, the shows worked as carefully mediated political (depoliticised and re-politicised) sites for the glorification of contemporary China’s national power and self-orientalised image as a prosperous country.

![Figure 3.7: A poster (from xkb.com.cn) for the second season of *The Great Challenge for Survival*, which aired in 2000, showing its participants holding a red flag printed with the title of the show and its challenge theme.](image)

For example, in the second season of *The Great Challenge for Survival*, participants were required to travel the original route of the Chinese Communist Long March ‘along the border regions and up into north China... [and to trace] the footsteps of communist heroes’. The Long March became known as the long, political retreat of the Communist army after it was defeated in 1934 during the Chinese Civil War. The retreat lasted over a year, and the army was said to wander over 8,000 miles within China. Media reporter Martin Adams notes that it was later framed by the party-state as ‘one of the longest fighting retreats in military history’, which eventually led to ‘a heroic victory’ for the Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War. Nevertheless, as Richard J.R. Kirkby’s 1985 research shows, the march was,

82 For a detailed discussion, see, ibid.
83 Keane, ‘It’s All in a Game’, p. 67.
in fact, extremely tragic, and less than a third of its participants survived.\textsuperscript{85} Furthermore, Adams points out that in recent years’ entertainment TV programmes, this bitter march has been politically commemorated, mythologised and often used as a propagandistic theme.\textsuperscript{86} The challenge theme of \textit{The Great Challenge for Survival}, ‘Re-Experience the Long March’ (‘\textit{Chongzou Changzhenglu}’) is a case in point.

As shown in Figure 4.7, the show’s participants were asked to hold a red flag during their journey. Qiang Huang’s study notes that the red flag, as well as the colour \textit{red} itself, has served as a political symbol for Chinese socialism and the Communist Party since the early 20th century.\textsuperscript{87} Seen in this vein, the show’s broadcasting of contemporary Chinese people reexperiencing the hardship suffered by the Communist army during the 1930s’ march while carrying the symbolic red flag showcased the depoliticisation and repoliticisation (or commercialisation and romanticisation) of this period of (traumatic) history in contemporary Chinese reality programmes.

Chinese media scholar Ling Yang’s 2014 research on more recent reality talent shows finds the genre loaded, albeit in a nuanced manner, with heavy political and ideological meanings related to Chinese national discourses.\textsuperscript{88} Using the Chinese version of the UK-originated \textit{Got Talent} franchise, \textit{China’s Got Talent} (Shanghai Dragon TV, China, 2010-2014) as an example, L. Yang argues that the show’s representations of the ‘ordinary’ public ‘promot[ed] a mirage of good society, patriotic citizens, caring family, and everlasting heterosexual love’.\textsuperscript{89} She argues that, by this means, the show ‘tri[ed] to advocate the traditional idea of seeking happiness in harmonious social relationships rather than in material possessions and indulgence,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid.
\item Yang, ‘Reality Talent Shows’, pp. 516-540.
\item Ibid., p. 532.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
ignoring the fact that income inequality has become the main factor for Chinese people’s decline of happiness’. 90 Thus, these seemingly ‘depoliticised’ images of underrepresented, marginalised groups (working class people in L. Yang’s discussion of *China’s Got Talent*) were charged with a Chinese-specific social aspiration to find ‘personal happiness’.

As anthropologist Jie Yang points out, the promotion of personal happiness in the media and public culture was ‘a corollary to the Chinese political project of building “a harmonious society” envisioned in 2004 by Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao’. 91 J. Yang’s 2014 research on re-employment counselling in China reveals that the promotion of seeking through this form of state-led psychological help for unemployed people can be understood as ‘a governing technology that delivers “therapy” in order to “heal” and integrate those who have been displaced and impoverished by privatization into the market economy’. 92 Moreover, Yanhua Zhang’s research on the Confucian lectures given by the Mainland China-based female scholar Yu Dan, which were broadcast on CCTV in 2006, reveals a similar televised discourse on personal happiness in neoliberal China. 93 As Zhang finds, Yu’s lecturing of ‘the Confucian wisdom for happiness’ created

A hybrid Confucian solution that articulates the social and economic conflicts and dis-eases in terms of psychological needs for happiness and of personal problems in adaptation. … [T]his particular Confucian remedy for the heart is appropriated as therapeutic resources and knowledge for self-care and self-strengthening. … [T]his popularized Confucian wisdom for happiness is surely ideological but also emotive, and is crafted, prescribed and appropriated to mediate between how to ‘feel’ as a cultural subject of Chinese person and to ‘live’ in everyday life as a modern neoliberal individual in the globalized market era in contemporary China. 94

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90 Ibid.
94 Ibid., pp. 32-33.
Seen from this angle, by depoliticising (downplaying the social struggles faced by the working class) and re-politicising (underlining self-responsibility as seeking happiness) images of ‘ordinary’ people, *China’s Got Talent* mediated ‘the state’s ideological campaign’ and neoliberal national projects through its glocalisation of the Talent format.95

This seemingly politically charged participatory culture of reality talent shows was interpreted by some scholars, such as Yu Huang, as a sign of China’s turn to quasi-civil society, especially for gender and sexual minorities.96 However, as I demonstrate in the rest of this chapter, *SVG*’s queer glocalisation of reality singing competition formats created a participatory, queer fantasy for its participants, audiences and fans. The show was carefully managed to modify queer female images into highly profitable, politically ‘innocuous’, ideologically constructive entertainment. This queer-glocalist process depoliticised gender-nonnormative women by dissociating these images of queer female stars from real-life lesbian and non-heterosexual identities. By negating the lesbian ‘possibilities’ of its stars, the show established viable spaces for the survival of some androgynous women and female same-sex fantasies in pop culture, yet often at the expense of the simultaneous capitalisation, fetishisation, delegitimisation and further silencing of female homosexuality and homoeroticism in off-screen heteropatriarchal reality.

3. The emerging queerness of provincial station-produced reality singing competitions

Similar to many Western reality TV shows, *SVG* combined and modified various TV formats and genres, including talent shows, game shows, makeover shows and TV documentaries. Having premiered in 2004, the show reached its ratings peak in 2005 and 2006, partially due to its large number of visibly masculine participants, some of whom were high-profile and made it

into the national competitions (fig. 3.8). In the first season in 2004, the show drew in 60,000 participants in its nationwide selections. In its second season in 2005, SVG had 150,000 participants in its preliminary auditions, more than 400 million viewers all over the world for its final national competition episode, and charged more than RMB112,000 (about USD16,900) for every fifteen-second commercial break during the broadcasting of its final episode. Since the rankings of the three finalists in the national competition were solely decided by the audience’s cellphone text-message votes, audience voting became the most profitable segment of the show. The 2005 final national competition brought HTV more than RMB 15 million (approximately USD 2.26 million) in revenue through the text-message voting charges alone (at USD 0.015 per vote). Its 2005 tomboyish winner, Li Yuchun, received 3.5 million audience votes alone for the final episode of the national competition. In 2006, tomboyish winner Shang Wenjie obtained more than 5.19 million votes (at USD 0.15 per vote) in total in the last voting round. It was reported that in the final voting round in SVG’s 2006 national competition, audience votes generated more than USD 3 million in profits for HTV. Throughout the years, gender-norm-defying participants had always made up a large portion of the show’s national finalists. This unexpected economic success of queer stardom on SVG also partially showcases both the Chinese audience’s great support for, as well as the show’s deliberate promotion of, queer female images, styles and relationships.

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98 Wu, ‘Enlightenment or Entertainment’, p. 53.
99 Yue and Yu, ‘China’s Super Girl’, p. 118.
100 Caiping Huang, ‘Super Voice Girl and Mass Culture’ (Chaoji Nüsheng he Dazhong Wenhua), Journal of Ezhou University 13:1 (2006), p. 55. This price was reported as ‘RMB 2,500 (about US$310) more than the highest price for an equivalent slot on CCTV during prime time’. See Hong, Lv and Zou, ‘CCTV in the Reform Years’, p. 51.
Figure 3.8: A poster for the 2005 SVG with the top five national finalists, two of whom were tomboyish girls.

For example, the 2005 winner, Li Yuchun (fig. 3.9), the 2005 runner-up, Zhou Bichang (fig. 3.10), the 2006 winner, Shang Wenjie (fig. 3.11) and the 2006 second runner-up, Liu Liyang (fig. 3.12) were all girls in their twenties with tomboyish personas. Their looks—including short spiked hair, loose shirts and baggy jeans—and their performance styles—performing love songs and dances meant for men—challenged mainstream female gender ideals (e.g., wearing skirts and cute costumes and behaving in a coy, hyper-feminine manner) and thus encouraged expressions of queer desire among their female fans. As revealed in Ling Yang and Hongwei Bai’s 2012 research onSVG and my own work on the online queer gossip about certain SVG participants at the height of the show’s popularity in 2005 and 2006, there were hundreds of large-scale online fan sites devoted to queer readings of these tomboyish SVG idols. The more popular sites had thousands of entries per day during the airing of the competition.


Figure 3.9: A picture of the 2005 SVG winner, Li Yuchun, who gained a worldwide female-dominated fan base but whose masculine persona on the show was criticised by many male netizens.

Figure 3.10: A poster of the 2005 SVG runner-up, Zhou Bichang, another tomboyish girl who rarely wore traditionally feminine clothes (such as skirts and high heels).
Figure 3.11: A screen capture of the tomboyish 2006 SVG winner, Shang Wenjie, during the national competition, showcasing her gender-nonnormative appearance and style.

Figure 3.12: A poster (from AsisCool.com) of the 2006 SVG second runner-up, Liu Liyang, during her performance in the regional competition. She was the winner of the regional round in Guangzhou and gained a substantial queer fan base for her tomboyish look.
The gendered transformations of the post-show career and celebrity personas of some SVG stars also demonstrate the show’s capitalisation and manipulation of female androgyny and masculinity. Zhou (fig. 3.10) was initially a popular tomboyish SVG celebrity who acquired many queer fans. However, in recent years, she has become a singer with a traditionally defined feminine persona, which she adopted in response to the volume of questions and doubts regarding her singledom she has had to contend with while she has aged. Shang (fig. 3.11), the 2006 winner and extremely controversial SVG celebrity, presents another example of this kind of gendered transformation. In her earlier SVG years, she became famous and was well received by viewers and fans for her ‘ordinary’, unattractive look, her perseverance and her dedication to becoming a pop singer despite the fact that she was a well-educated French interpreter and well-paid office worker in Shanghai before participating in the show. As I explain in my 2016 research on the queer nature of Chinese entertainment TV, Shang often attributed her ‘androgyny’ to her high level of education and her cosmopolitan background. However, not long after the show ended, she often appeared in public wearing heavy makeup, feminine dresses and high heels. Some netizens and audiences suspected that she had had facial plastic surgery to look traditionally feminine and beautiful. Some of her critics derogatorily called her the Chinese version of ‘Lady Gaga’ (the word ‘lady’ is phonetically similar to the Chinese term ‘lei di’, meaning ‘a king who can do awkward things to make people feel shocked or even disgusted’). Some also believed that Shang changed her look as a publicity stunt. This abrupt change in her on-screen look and style provoked much criticism from Chinese audiences, and videos mocking her facial transformation over the past ten years (which is considered a failure) have been widely circulated on YouTube.

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106 For online discussions surrounding, criticism and mocking of Shang’s facial and persona changes over the years, see http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-funinfo-4690642-1.shtml, https://www.gigcasa.com/articles/215222 and https://kknews.cc/entertainment/pexqn88.html
107 For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMX5wMVgR1M, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twzXmyL96U
A more disturbing case is the terminal trough in the star Liu Liyang’s career caused by a series of lesbian rumours. During the 2006 season of SVG, Liu was extremely famous for her tall, slim body type and handsome appearance, which made her stand out from other tomboyish participants. Liu became controversial in her post-SVG career for a different reason than the 2006 winner Shang did. As my previous research shows, in the early 2010s, rumours circulated and scandals emerged regarding Liu’s lesbianism, and she gradually lost the popularity and queer fan base she had gained during the competition. Liu’s celebrity image was largely ruined by these ‘negative’ rumours. She was subsequently ostracised from the entertainment industry, and her career has gone downhill since then.

As I have discussed in Chapter One, the unexpected popularity of provincial station-produced reality singing competitions, such as SVG, which ranked the nation’s second most popular show in its broadcasting time slot in 2004, led to a sudden surge in the number of similar shows in China and a homogenisation of the content, style and format of these shows. SVG itself was considered a ‘copycat’ of American Idol in its first few seasons. Although many of its segments are similar to those of Idol shows in other parts of the world, SVG’s producers have never officially acknowledged its use of the Idol style. The UK-based copyright owner Fremantle Media once sued HTV for plagiarising its Idol concept, but the case was dropped for lack of sufficient evidence. This incident and the success of SVG in 2005 instigated the first wave of reality singing competition shows in China, most of which copied and revised each other’s production models and formulas. Moreover, SVG’s capitalisation of androgyny was also ‘adapted’ in these later shows.

For example, My Hero (Jiayou! Hao Nan’er, Shanghai Dragon TV, China, 2006–2007; fig. 3.13), which was produced by Shanghai Dragon TV in 2006, only permitted cis-male participants and often presented intimate moments.

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108 For detailed discussions on her rumoured lesbianism and her queer fans’ response to her lesbian scandals, see Zhao, ‘The Ebb and Flow of Female Homoeconomicism’, pp. 33-45.
111 Ibid., p. 111.
between beautiful male participants. Other similar shows appeared during this period, including HTV’s male version of SVG, Happy Voice Boy (Kuaile Nansheng, HTV, China, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2017; fig. 3.14), Jiangsu Satellite TV’s Absolute Singing (Juedui Changxiang; China, 2006–2009; fig. 3.15) and Shanghai Dragan TV’s My Show (Woxing Woxiu, China, 2004–2009). While Absolute Singing and My Show both allowed both male and female participants, moments of homosociality and gender-nonnormative personas were common in both contests.

Figure 3.13: A screen capture of My Hero participants. Most of its male participants were androgynous, beautiful young men who often intentionally performed intimate gestures with each other on the stage.

Figure 3.14: A screen capture of a regional competition for the show Happy Voice Boy, which, like SVG, was famous for its demonstrations of male homosociality and brotherhood.
Besides their tendency to manipulate gender-nonnormative personas, same-sex friendships and on-stage bonding, one common strategy of these homogenous reality competition shows was to present participants’ performances and identities as ‘entertaining real[ity]’ by emphasising their seemingly ‘unmediated and voyeuristic’ realness. Tactics to achieve this goal included revealing the awkward singing and dancing performances of grassroots, unprofessional participants and the ‘candid (sometimes excessive) display of emotions’ on stage, as well as emphasising the ‘authenticity’ of participants’ gendered (often queered) personas and intimacies. Although these nonprofessional (and thus considered non-elitist and abnormal) and gender-nonnormative images were deployed as promotional strategies, they were considered inconsistent with, or even contradictory to, the government’s advocacy for ‘positive’ (‘zhengmian de’/‘jiji de’; also meaning ‘normative’ and ‘qualified’; ‘zhengchang de’ and ‘hege de’ in Chinese) representations of ordinary people.

As discussed in Chapter One, in 2007, the government began to tighten its regulations on entertainment programmes broadcast by provincial satellite...

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TV stations. Since 2011, the national media bureau have issued a series of official documents known as ‘the Limit Entertainment Order’ setting out its adjusted policies limiting the amount and rectifying the content of satellite TV programmes that are ‘excessively entertaining’ or ‘vulgar’. These regulations led to a short hiatus of Chinese reality singing competition shows in the early 2010s. However, shortly after this, more official formatted shows (whose copyrights were purchased through legal means) were produced by provincial stations. These included as the abovementioned China’s Got Talent (fig. 3.16), The Voice of China (Zhejiang Satellite TV, China, 2012–2015; fig. 3.17) and the Chinese version of Duets (Zuimei Hesheng, Beijing Satellite TV, China, 2013–2015; fig. 3.18), which was adapted from the original American show of the same name (ABC, 2012). These more recent adapted shows often featured a mentorship system (celebrity mentors and ordinary participants). Some of these shows not only appropriated and revised diverse TV formats and concepts but also incorporated original creative elements and segments. For instance, the original formula for the second season of the Chinese Duets was readapted and reversely ‘imported’ by the Western Duets copyright owner. In addition, as my previous research demonstrates, these more recent singing contests’ queer exploration of gender nonnormativities and same-sex intimacies was persistent and extensive.

114 See https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%99%90%E5%A8%B1%E4%BB%A4/1820111?fr=aladin
115 Some popular reality singing competition shows are also formatted from Korean concepts, such as the Chinese version of I Am A Singer (HTV, China, 2013–2016) and The Ultimate Entertainer (Jiangsu Satellite TV, China, 2013). Yet these shows often exclusively focus on celebrity and professional singers competing with each other.
Figure 3.16: A screen capture of the globally formatted show *China’s Got Talent*, which was jointly produced by media companies and TV stations located in both Britain and Shanghai.\textsuperscript{118}

Figure 3.17: A screen capture of the first season of the globally formatted show *The Voice of China*. The show was produced by Shanghai-based Canxing Production and was broadcast on Zhejiang TV between 2012 and 2015.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{118} For details, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China%27s_Got_Talent
\textsuperscript{119} For details, see http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0707/c40606-28531240.html. In 2016, there was a contractual dispute between Canxing and the owner of the rights to the *Voice* franchise. In July 2016, to avoid copyright infringement, Canxing started producing its own singing competition show, *Sing! China (Zhongguo Xin’gesheng)*; Zhejiang TV, China, 2016-), although the new show’s format and style largely resembled those of the *Voice* shows.
Figure 3.18: A screen capture of the Chinese reality singing show *Duets* (from ent.epopel.com.cn), which added many of its own creative elements to its adaptation of the original American format. The homosociality between some male mentors and participants (such as that between the celebrity singer Jam Hsiao and his mentees) were also emphasised to attract the attention of audiences and the media.

While some of the abovementioned recent singing contests present examples of androgynous images of men and male homosocial tensions on Chinese live entertainment TV, my analysis in the next chapter (Chapter Four) focuses on female-to-male cross-dressing performances and male impersonation in formatted programmes. In the rest of this chapter, with reference to *SVG*’s queer representations and celebrity culture, I demonstrate that *SVG* persisted with strategies that de-realised and depoliticised on-screen queer performances and thus dissociated them from off-screen LGBTQ politics in order to survive and succeed in the highly commercialised media environment of contemporary Chinese heteronormative society. By so doing, *SVG* ambivalently cultivated a platform for androgynous females to perform and articulate diverse gendered identities and same-sex fantasies, although these were often limited to online performances.

### 4. The Mainland-specific zhongxing and the perverse matrix of *SVG*

Both the audience’s overwhelming enthusiasm for the queer stars of *SVG* and the unprecedentedly high profits these stars generated drew significant media and scholarly attention from all over the world. Audrey Yue and Haiqing Yu’s research claims that this hype, celebrated by both the media market and the audience, presaged a new wave of Chinese feminism that disrupted the male gaze and traditional feminine ideals and that was concomitant with the marketisation and globalisation of the Chinese media industry. ¹²⁰ Conversely, drawing on Guy Debord’s and Douglas Kellner’s respective concepts of ‘spectacle’ and ‘media spectacle’,¹²¹ Meng understands *SVG*’s successful reception as built upon ‘a symbolic subversion of state ideology’ yet simultaneously reinforcing ‘the concentration of symbolic power in the

¹²⁰ Yue and Yu, ‘China’s Super Girl’, pp. 117-134.
Therefore, SVG’s grassroots participatory character and its promotion of underrepresented Chinese women (tomboyish girls) did not guarantee a democratic public sphere in mainstream Chinese society. While both stances attempt to contextualise the show’s popularity within real-world Chinese feminist and political discourses, they nevertheless overlook the show’s persistent tendency to de-realise and depoliticise its feminist and queer potential.

Some HK- and Taiwan-based scholars have also explored SVG celebrity culture. For instance, in her 2014 study, Hong Kong-based gender scholar Lucetta Kam argues that the tomboyish SVG singers emerged along with ‘the rapid development of local lesbian communities in major cities in China’. Kam claims that this gendered pop cultural phenomenon—in particular, the masculinility of these young female reality TV stars—is closely associated with, and has significantly shaped and contributed to, Chinese lesbian culture in a globalist, neoliberal context. In particular, Kam adopts the term ‘T’, a lesbian masculine gender label used in Chinese-speaking lesbian communities, to describe the style of the SVG stars. She argues that ‘the commercialization of “T-style” by the Super Girls has greatly enhanced the visibility and positive interpretation of masculine women in China’ and ‘created a much bigger cultural space for masculine lesbian women in China’.

I do not necessarily disagree with Kam’s insightful findings on ‘the possible mutual referencing of gender styles of these commercial pop music singers and local lesbian genders and the impact of the former on the visibility of the emerging lesbian community in China’. In fact, my analysis of SVG illustrates that the formation and persistence of its queer female stardom drew on local lesbian-related cultures. Nevertheless, through an analytical lens that

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123 Ibid., p. 253.
124 Ibid., pp. 252-265.
125 The lesbian gender label, ‘T’, is a localised word appropriated from the English-word, ‘tomboy’. It is commonly used in Chinese lesbian communities to refer to the active, masculine role in lesbian relationships.
126 Ibid., p. 260.
127 Ibid., p. 257.
decouples gender from sexuality, I interpret the show’s success and that of its androgynous stars in Mainland China as the result of the celebrities’ constant negation of the potential lesbian sexuality suggested by their masculine gender traits and transgender performances on TV.

Notably, in the second half of 2000s, Taiwan soon adopted similar reality singing competition formats and produced several popular programmes, such as _One Million Star_ (Chaoji Xingguang Dadao; CTV, Taiwan, 2007–2011; figs. 3.19 and 3.20) and _Super Idol_ (Chaoji Ouxiang; SET, Taiwan, 2007–2014; fig. 3.21). These Taiwanese shows featured a large number of gender-nonnormative female celebrities, just like their Mainland counterparts. As Kam finds, the queer female stardom in these Chinese-speaking SVG-style shows has promulgated a transregional, cosmopolitan, tomboyish fashion trend, which, in turn, has created aged, classed hierarchies and sustained lookism in the real world.\textsuperscript{128}

![Figure 3.19: A screen capture of the most famous tomboyish female participant, Jin Dai (Dai Anna), performing in the second season of the Taiwanese show *One Million Star* in 2007](image)

\textsuperscript{128} Kam, ‘Desiring T’, pp. 252-265. Lookism is a form of cultural discrimination against people whose outward looks are deemed less attractive according to mainstream beauty standards of a society.
Figure 3.20: A poster for the first album of the finalists in the second season of the show *One Million Star*, featuring its tomboyish celebrity Jin Dai in the middle of the first row.

Figure 3.21: A screen capture of the tomboyish winner, Jing Chang (Zhang Yunjing), of the first season of the Taiwanese show *Super Idol* in 2007.

Moreover, Taiwanese scholar Yu-Ying Hu and Hong Kong sociologist Eva Li both believe that the rise of queer stardom and fandom associated with *SVG* is part of the transnational, inter-Asian pop cultural phenomenon,
Zhongxing. In particular, Li, who coined the term, zhongxing—meaning ‘neutral gender/sex’—in her study of the queer fandom of the openly lesbian Hong Kong celebrity Ho Denise Wan See, regards it as a recently re-emerged media phenomenon with a unique, local cultural meaning shared within East Asian Chinese societies. It traditionally ‘highlights “negating” of both sexes (literally ‘neither man nor woman’) and dates back to 1,000 A.D. Therefore, this term cannot be translated to the Anglophone word ‘androgyne’, which instead denotes ‘an intermediary state between masculinity and femininity’ (cixiongtongti) and, in a traditional Chinese sociocultural context, is considered ‘a healthy phenomenon’ that refers to ‘possessing traits of both sexes’ in the same body. Li traces the resurfacing of the zhongxing phenomenon, including the use of the term zhongxing, in contemporary Chinese-speaking pop culture back to the Taiwanese and Hong Kong pop music industries of the 1980s, which saw the advent of many gender-nonnormative singers. As Li claims, facilitated by the trans-Asian and global information flows of the 2000s, zhongxing has been appropriated to describe many gender-nonnormative stars in Chinese-speaking pop cultures, such as the tomboyish stars of the abovementioned Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese reality singing competitions. She finds that, today, the term ‘represents a sensibility that cannot be easily placed into identity categories’ and instead is often used ‘as a camouflage for the derogatory identity label of butch lesbian’. Thus, she regards it as closely associated with ‘the [queer] politics of ambiguity’.


Li, ‘Approaching’, p. 79.

Ibid., p. 84.

Ibid., p. 85.

Ibid., p. 85.
female *zhongxing* pop culture appropriates and entangles itself with *both* Chinese lesbian culture and global and inter-Asian queer pop culture.\(^{137}\)

This theory is worthy of lengthy review here because this body of scholarship on Chinese-speaking queer female stardom in reality TV, though aiming to challenge the universalism of Western LGBTQ identity politics and theories, has problematically accredited the popularisation of the current *zhongxing* culture in Mainland China to previous celebrity cases in Taiwan and Hong Kong. By these means, it renders the concept of *zhongxing* a generalised Chinese-speaking queer framework that can transgress the geocultural boundaries of diverse Chinese-speaking societies and be cross-culturally applicable. However, despite sharing some common historical roots with Mainland China and having mutually shaped each other’s pop cultures in recent years, Taiwan and Hong Kong have relatively more liberal, lesbian-visible, queer-friendly political and sociocultural environments.

For instance, both of these two Chinese-speaking societies have had large-scale annual gay pride parades since the 2000s. In the 2010s, some of the famous *zhongxing* female stars in Hong Kong and Taiwan have publicly come out as butch lesbians. Notable examples are the Hong Kong singer Ho discussed in Li’s study and the 2007 participant of *One Million Star* Dai shown in Figures 4.19 and 4.20. More interestingly, the 2007 winner of *Super Idol*, Chang, converted to Christianity in 2013. After her conversion, she has not only swapped her outward tomboyish look for a traditionally feminine one (with long hair and feminine dresses), but also changed her sexual preference to male due to her religious beliefs (and publicly admitted that she is searching for the perfect guy for heterosexual marriage) (fig. 3.22).\(^{138}\) As shown in Figure 3.22, Chang’s trilby hat in her feminine look, which is considered a masculine or androgynous accessory for girls, especially in the West, may be a gesture to ‘sustain the masculine flavour of the outfit’ she is wearing.\(^{139}\) Nevertheless, in contemporary East Asia, trilbies are commonly

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\(^{137}\) Ibid.; and Hu, ‘Mainstreaming Female Masculinity’.

\(^{138}\) See http://www.chinatimes.com/cn/newspapers/20140911000630-260112

worn by both young men and women as a form of yuppie fashion. In this sense, Chang’s gender and sexuality, although allegedly ‘back to normal’, are opened to interpretations. The publicly self-acknowledged heterosexual transformation of Chang’s look, celebrity persona and sexual orientation contradictorily reveals her non-heterosexual gender and sexual identities in her previous zhongxing stage. This contradiction between zhongxing and heterosexuality/traditional femininity points to the close association of the Hong Kong and Taiwanese zhongxing discourses with female non-heterosexuality or lesbianism.

By contrast, contemporary Mainland China has few high-profile, openly out lesbian celebrities. None of the SVG stars has come out, despite numerous lesbian rumours circulating online about many of them since their first appearances on the shows.\textsuperscript{140} Meanwhile, as mentioned in Chapter One, LGBTQ media and public culture remain ‘sensitive’ in Mainland Chinese public discourses. Moreover, SVG has been continually working on and revising its queer female images within a largely heteronormative social reality that has a unique history of understanding female intimacy as a form of ‘sisterhood’ or ‘an emotion or sentiment’ (qing).\textsuperscript{141} As discussed in detail

\textsuperscript{140} Since the 2006 SVG, there have been some famous grassroots lesbian participants who had already come out in Chinese cyberspace before they appeared on the show. Yet, after their rise to stardom on the show, none of them openly admitted their lesbianism. Almost all of them rejected their lesbian rumors during media interviews.

\textsuperscript{141} Sang, The Emerging Lesbian, pp. 1-34.
earlier in this thesis, following the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the socialist party-state promoted a patriarchal form of female androgyyny during the Cultural Revolution years, which forcibly erased female gender differences to achieve a rigid, distorted understanding of feminism and gender equality (see my discussion in Chapter One). \textsuperscript{142} Later, during the post-socialist liberation years after 1990, political-economic reforms capitalised on and hypersexualised women’s bodies and desires during the processes of globalisation and neoliberalisation. \textsuperscript{143} In addition, as I have highlighted in Chapter One, the female androgyyny promoted in today’s contemporary Mainland Chinese entertainment, in particular, has roots in the state feminism in the socialist years and the public cultural discourse on manly lady (\textit{nǔ hanzī}) in postsocialist China. These contextual specificities of Mainland Chinese female genders and sexualities have rendered its media representations of female masculinity and intimacy, even on reality TV, less of sociocultural signifiers of lesbian identification. Rather, some images of the \textit{SVG} stars, referred to as \textit{zhongxing} in Mainland Chinese media and pop culture, may only signal a form of on-screen gendered performances or individual attributes. This context-specific meanings and connotations of \textit{zhongxing} shaped by various social, historical and political forces in Chinese-speaking societies should not be ignored and simplified in a trans-regionally applicable framework proposed in Li’s and Hu’s research.

More importantly, while \textit{zhongxing} is used as a less socioculturally censored and stigmatised term to denote butch lesbians in Hong Kong and Taiwan (which further confirms the non-heterosexuality of \textit{zhongxing} people), the emphasising of \textit{zhongxing} qualities of the tomboyish contestants on \textit{SVG} contributes to the stipulation of an ‘authentic’ female heterosexuality in their private lives. In other words, the on-screen high profiling of their \textit{zhongxing} style helps negate the possibility that the \textit{SVG} stars are real-life lesbians. The show, shaped by the specific gendered traditions and public culture of Mainland China, persistently produced the queer personas of its celebrities as

\textsuperscript{142} Xiao, ‘Androgynous Beauty’, p. 113.
\textsuperscript{143} See, Yang, ed., \textit{Spaces of Their Own}.
‘fictional truths’. That is, the SVG celebrities are represented as ‘real’, ‘ordinary’ people who live in a still largely heteronormative, discriminatory society. They are selected to either display scripted queer media narratives and characters on the show that are considered acceptable or celebratory and entertaining in contemporary China, or to present their gender nonnormativity in the form of personalities and characters, such as immaturity, innocence and diligence.

The de-lesbianised queer celebrity culture on SVG carries multilayered sociocultural implications. On the one hand, what underpins the unexpected success of its queer stardom is the ubiquitous existence of queer female desires, voices and fantasies in the production, circulation and consumption of the show. On the other hand, SVG celebrities’ gender-nonnormative performances do not necessarily authenticate their private lesbian selves or legitimise lesbianism in public culture. In contrast to the Chinese phrase ‘lesbian’ (nü tongxinglian), which often refers to a medicalised or restrictive identity category of women’s nonnormative eroticism in modern China, the show can only be described as ‘queer’—a term that highlights the constitutive limits of normative reality and, therefore, emphasises its own performative, playful and sometimes negotiative and even pejorative nature.

Ultimately, this queer reality show offers a high-profile, spectacular fantasy of female masculinity and intimacy that is sensational, profitable and ‘politically compatible’ with neoliberal Chinese ideologies and economic-political reforms, as well as a limited, temporary space for queer female agency and expressions. More intriguingly, this intentional disassociation of queer images and celebrity personas with off-screen lesbian identification also self-contradictorily unmasks the performative nature of gender and sexuality.

As Western queer and feminist theories, such as those of Judith Butler, reveal, dyadic gender norms are visualised through bodily behaviours and beings and

145 Sang, The Emerging Lesbian, pp. 1-34.
146 Keane, Fung and Moran, New Television, p. 171.
thus produce and sustain an ‘internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire’ in one’s gender and sexual identifications, which ultimately sustains ‘a compulsory heterosexuality’. Following this logic, in the next sections, I look at the norm-disruptive dimensions of SVG’s texts and paratexts over the years. I investigate how nonnormative gendered expressions that are often closely associated with nonnormative sexual orientations have been played yet also strategically employed to disidentify with nonnormative gender and sexual identifications in a dominant gender/sex system.

On this point, it is worth noting that this queer ‘depoliticisation’ of nonnormative gender identities in a mainstream entertainment culture involves what I call a ‘perverse matrix’. The ‘perverse matrix’ is a queer inversion of Butler’s ‘heterosexual matrix’ in a predominantly hetero-patriarchal public space. According to Butler, the formation and functioning of the heterosexual matrix ‘requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine”, where these are understood as expressive attributes of “male” and “female”’. Butler elaborates that

[...]he cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender. ‘Follow’ in this context is a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality. Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of ‘gender identities’ fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. Their persistence and proliferation, however, provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder.

The queer stardom of SVG exemplified a capitalist celebration and proliferation in contemporary Mainland Chinese entertainment of some supposedly ‘unintelligible’ gender identities in the heterosexual matrix, such

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148 Ibid., p. 23.
149 Ibid., p. 17.
as tomboyism, that do not ‘follow’ from female sex. However, this proliferation of ‘perverse’ gender identities in mainstream media cultures and public spaces does not guarantee a straightforward intervention into China’s heteronormative system. Instead, what has been revised and valorised into a perverse discourse is the heterosexual matrix itself, in which some ‘impossible’ or ‘illogical’ gender identities, personas and practices (e.g., tomboyish stars who performed same-sex intimacies on TV) are detached from ‘unintelligible’ forms of sexuality (e.g., lesbianism) and thus become heterosexualised and able to survive and even thrive in a seemingly ‘more lenient’ mainstream culture and society. As my reading of SVG shows, this imposed cultural intelligibility and heterosexual inclusion of nonnormative female genders and performances was initiated and nurtured by the capitalist power of the entertainment industry and challenged by and later revised according to political-ideological forces. At the same time, the producers, participants, viewers and fans of SVG also negotiated the convergence of local gender traditions, Inter-Asian pop culture and Western media and cultural influences. Therefore, the perverse matrix, though problematic, also epitomises a certain degree of queer agency among those who were deemed outcasts in the heterosexual matrix (e.g., the tomboyish stars who might have playfully and momentarily practised ‘perverse’ desires but who never self-identified as lesbians). The existence of this perverse matrix in Mainland China exposes the hypocrisy of the hetero-patriarchal, normative structure of mainstream Chinese society.

Ultimately, I argue that SVG epitomised a ‘queer sensationalism’ that produces and promotes gender-nonnormative identities and personas as spectacular and profitable entertainment. By confining queer performances and intimacies to a less-threatening, fleeting, on-screen fantasy, this queer reality TV culture helped to revise China’s heterosexual matrix, reconfigure the limits of normative female gender (e.g., by including female masculinity as a form of heterosexual female gender identity) and ‘fictionalise’ female homoeroticism, thus inviting viewers’ queer readings. On the one hand, this seemingly ‘perverse’ queer pop culture offered opportunities for some SVG celebrities’ performative manipulation, violation and reconstruction of
traditional gender ideals through their public personas. On the other hand, the off-screen normative structure is not significantly disrupted—and is sometimes even strengthened—by this process.

5. One decade of queer profiling, coupling and killing on SVG

Since 2005, some heteronormative Chinese netizens have held the tomboyish participants on SVG in disdain for their queer personas.\(^{150}\) The imperfect voices and the often unprofessional and sometimes childish stage performances of these tomboyish contestants have also provoked a lot of professional criticism. Yet the contestants’ fans have often applauded their androgyny on the show as a norm-defying, desirable personal characteristic.\(^{151}\) During the competition, SVG purposefully displayed many homosocial moments between the tomboyish participants and the other participants, who were relatively more feminine (fig. 3.23).\(^{152}\)

![Figure 3.23: A screen capture of the five national finalists of the 2005 SVG singing together onstage; the tomboyish ones wore spiky hairstyles and relatively more androgynous suit jackets and trousers, while the feminine ones wore long hair and close-fitting cheongsams.](image)

Take, for example, the PK (player killing) competition segment of the show. PK is the moment when the contestant with the fewest votes and the contestant deemed least satisfactory by the professional judges stand side by side on the stage and [compete with each other by] sing[ging] an excerpt of a

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\(^{150}\) Yang and Bao, ‘Queerly Intimate’, pp. 842-871.

\(^{151}\) Xiao, ‘Androgynous Beauty’, p. 117.

\(^{152}\) Xiao, ‘Androgynous Beauty’, p. 117.
song of their choice a cappella.\textsuperscript{153} This is often an important part of \textit{SVG} that further eroticizes the homosociality between the contestants. In 2005, the ‘best friend’ of the tomboyish winner, Li, was the traditionally feminine participant, He Jie, who was eliminated in the PK segment of the final round of the national competition. During \textit{SVG}’s live-broadcasting of this PK process, the camera cut to Li, who stood below the stage and could not stop crying about her ‘best friend’, He’s elimination. In the final sequence of the same episode, all the finalists stood onstage, thanking the audience and judges. The camera zoomed in on Li’s emotional face again and gave a series of close-up shots of her long, tight hug with He (fig. 3.24). Although some research views this explicit revelation of Li’s emotions onstage as a display of her innocent and powerless self,\textsuperscript{154} many fans interpreted the two contestants’ emotional ties and intimate behaviours with each other in homoerotic terms in online queer fandoms devoted to them.\textsuperscript{155} In later seasons of \textit{SVG}, this strategy to dramatise and homoeroticise the PK processes of some contestants (often androgynous ones) became quite common. It also encouraged fans of the feminine participants allied with fans of the tomboyish ones to celebrate the intimate ‘friendships’ between their idols as presented on the show and to vote for their idols’ on-screen ‘best friends’ as well.\textsuperscript{156}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Example image}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{153} Yang, ‘Reality Talent Shows’, p. 523.
\textsuperscript{155} Yang and Bao, ‘Queerly Intimate’, pp. 842-871.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
Beginning in the 2006 season, this queer sensationalism on SVG unabashedly escalated. SVG participants were often divided into two ‘gendered’ groups during the competition. The tomboyish ones were often coupled with the feminine ones to perform intimately onstage, and they shared hotel rooms from the regional competition rounds onwards. Although no cameras were set up in the rooms that the participants stayed in at the time, pictures taken from voyeuristic, panoptic angles that were similar to the camera work of the reality TV show, Big Brother, were often taken from outside the hotel and later circulated online. Some of the pictures showed participants who were sharing a hotel room hugging each other or changing clothes. It was rumoured that the pictures were staged and were taken by professionals who were hired by HTV and the show’s production company, EE-Media (Tianyu Chuanmei). Yet HTV soon refuted this rumour. Nevertheless, it largely encouraged fans to refer to some of the pairs who were frequently brought together on the show and asked to stay in the same hotel room as ‘official couples’ (guanpei). Meanwhile, docu-soap-style narratives surrounding certain popular queer SVG couples were also added to the show and distributed on its official fan site. These narratives often comprised a great many shots, pictures and sequences that captured seemingly unstaged sentimental interactions and romantic moments between partners who constituted official queer couples on-screen and off-screen.

For instance, as shown in Figure 3.25, in one 2006 backstage picture widely circulated on the show’s official fan site, one participant sat on a tomboyish participant’s laps. The two were a popular queer couple promoted in the 2006 season of the show. This kind of intentional queer coupling between two contestants of differently gendered personas has been quite common on the show over the years. Yet, HTV and EE-Media have never admitted to an intention to create homosocial bonds between some of their participants. Whenever questioned about their sexualities, most of the contestants either

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157 For details, see http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4ade0b3010009rv.html.
answered ambiguously about their romance histories and love lives or quickly denied the reliability of any lesbian rumours about them.

![Figure 3.25: One picture (from AsiaCool.com) that was taken backstage and widely circulated on the show’s official fan site on the most popular communicative platform, Baidu Post Bar.](image)

Meanwhile, SVG’s constant iteration of its celebrities as desirable model Chinese citizens onstage and offstage—a means of ‘de politicising’ the show’s queer ambience by adding ‘politically correct’ information and ideologies to the show—served as an effective way of either validating or ‘explaining’ the participants’ queer personas onstage. For instance, the show presented documentary-style backstage interviews and back stories for some of the successful SVG participants with lower-class backgrounds. Such a case in point was SVG’s narratives surrounding the second runner-up of the 2005 season, Zhang Liangying, who was not a tomboyish contestant. Zhang was often highly feminised onstage, coupled with some tomboyish contestants on the show and pictured as the partner of these tomboyish ones in queer fan productions. As L. Yang’s research shows, SVG’s narration of Zhang’s personal background and lived experiences also appeared to symbolise the rise of China in recent years and to encourage an ‘optimistic and nationalistic interpretation of the Chinese dream’ among viewers.  

These personal details of Zhang revealed on the show in such a cultural discourse helped to

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mitigate the lesbian rumours that she was a real-life femme at the time, which her fans often thought to be a form of denigration of her reputation.\textsuperscript{159}

Similarly, in the personal life stories presented on the show, the tomboyish participants were often portrayed as a generation of young, cosmopolitan, grassroots Chinese citizens with respectable characteristics, such as innocence, self-reliance, independence and bravery.\textsuperscript{160} One notable example was the tomboyish second runner-up in the 2006 \textit{SVG}, Liu. In one episode, during her regional competition, Liu was allowed to invite one of her personal friends onstage to narrate how she had helped the police to catch a thief (fig. 3.26). Her personal friend was a girl with a similar visibly tomboyish (or young butch lesbian) appearance. The camera constantly zoomed in on her friend’s right hand when she was telling the story onstage. Later, many viewers and online fans recognised the friend as one famous, openly out lesbian in Beijing. Some viewers also noticed that Liu and her friend both wore right-hand rings (on their index and little fingers), indicating a commonly known sign of butch lesbian identity in China. Through this sequence, Liu was not only presented as a courageous, virtuous Chinese citizen of good character but was also able to further reveal queer sentiments and flavours surrounding her gender and implied sexual ‘deviance’.\textsuperscript{161}
This combination of queer tantalisation and nationalistic-neoliberal narration on SVG can be seen as its producers’ proactive responses and tactics to negotiate with the government’s top-down ideological manipulation of entertainment in the 2000s. When HTV premiered the show in 2004, the original slogan for SVG was ‘Happy China, Super Voice Girl’ (kuaile zhongguo, chaoji nüsheng). Yet, its broadcasting of ordinary people’s rustic performances and the persistent, acute, onstage disharmonies between some of its participants, professional judges and fans were criticised by the media bureau (SARFT) for ‘severely undermin[ing] the state’s ideological control’. Later, in 2008, in response to SARFT’s tightening of regulations regarding entertainment content in the mass media, HTV decided to cancel the show. Since then, SVG has been restructured and revived several times. In 2007, the male version of the show, Super Voice Boy, was renamed Happy Voice Boy to emphasise the positive and constructive sociocultural implications of that kind of reality competition. Later, in 2009 and 2011, SVG was revived and similarly renamed Happy Voice Girl. During those two seasons, the show presented many short autobiographical narrations regarding how ‘happily’ some of the official queer couples were living, training and competing together. Those narratives about the participants’ shared ‘happiness’ helped to intensify and legitimise their female intimacies.

This is not to say that the market and economic powers purely exploited and manipulated the show’s participants in the queer construction of their stardom. While some of the participants involved in SVG’s onstage queer coupling quickly went back to their ‘normal’ feminine, heterosexual lives after the competition, a few successful tomboyish ones have continued to actively reconfigure their queer celebrity personas and performances in other shows over the years. For example, the 2005 tomboyish winner, Li, has frequently given self-designed queer performances in her own concerts and

162 For details, see http://www.mgtv.com/supergirl/news170.htm
164 The show was previously titled Super Voice Boy in 2003.
variety shows which provincial stations produced. In the 2011 ceremony of
the Chinese Music Awards (*Zhong Ge Bang*), she and her queer partner in the
2005 *SVG*, Zhang, covered Madonna’s song, ‘La Isla Bonita’, with a senior
Chinese female pop singer (fig. 3.27). During their performance, Li wore a
white suit jacket and trousers, while Zhang wore a revealing senorita’s dress
of the same colour. The two performed a mix of flamenco and modern
dancing as a heterosexual couple to the accompaniment of this famous love
song. In 2016 and 2017, Li performed songs from her new album during her
national tour, at some fashion shows and at the local *Spring Festival Galas*
that Shanghai Dragon TV and Anhui Satellite TV produced. Her
performances always featured a group of macho male dancers with a light
campy style, who were half-naked in SM-style tight black leather pants and
white fur coats (fig. 3.28). In addition, despite having been suspected to be a
closeted butch lesbian for years, Li often wore long evening gowns when
attending high fashion shows, while it has not been uncommon for her to wear
masculine suits during her public appearances over the past decade.

Figure 3.27: A screen capture (from Chinanews.com) of the official 2005
*SVG* couple performing the song ‘La Isla Bonita’ in 2011.
A similar case is that of the 2006 second runner-up, Liu. In the online 2011 Spring Festival Gala, which Beijing TV produced, Liu and two traditionally feminine female singers presented a rendition of the controversial 2003 MTV VMA performance of the song, ‘Like a Virgin’, by Madonna, Christian Aguilera and Britney Spears (fig. 3.29). While the stage was basically set as it had been for the original 2003 performance, the French-kissing scene between the three female singers of the original one was missing from Liu’s rendition (fig. 3.30).
This consistent queer play that both SVG and its stars engaged in over the years invited the expression of queer fantasies and readings by the viewers. It also renders on-screen queer intimacies and tomboyism lesser signs of real-life lesbian identity, while these queer efforts and designs certainly, to some extent, challenged rigid gender norms and ideals as natural, inherent, stable gender traits for Chinese women. As I illustrate in the next section, facilitated by global and inter-Asian information flows and the convergence of TV and digital media, this contradictory process eventually led to an emergence of a queer sensationalist pop culture—that is detached from lesbian identification and politics on the one hand but that discursively voices queer agency on the other—in the 2016 SVG.

6. Queerly sensationalising the Internet in 2016

Online interactive media, such as blogs and social network sites, offer ways of mediating sociocultural identities and, in turn, enable the rise of ‘microcelebrities’,165 ‘where ordinary people create a web presence and a public persona’ through cyber self-presentation. 166 These identity construction, circulation and presentation functions of Chinese cyberspace in particular, shaped by the joint forces of a gendered video industry and

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neoliberal discourse, have created numerous internet celebrities since 2000. One notable Chinese-specific cyber celebrity phenomenon that emerged in the 2010s is the ‘wanghong (internet celebrity) ecology’, in which ‘personal branding, professionalisation of production and stylised performances from [predominantly] female performers’ are live-streamed and monetised on online video sites and interactive platforms. This phenomenon has been greatly facilitated by the burgeoning and convergence of major Chinese video streaming websites and online broadcasters, which have, in recent years, aimed simultaneously to ‘professionalise platform-specific celebrities and formalise amateur contents’, as well as to merge with traditional media venues and to broadcast online entertainment. While I further discuss this online queer televisual turn in the concluding chapter, this section focuses on this digitised celebrity culture in China, which queerly appropriated in its 2016 cyber transformation.

The cyber TV and celebrity culture in 2010s China has given rise to a specific group of online gendered celebrities, namely female livestreamers (nü zhubo, or ‘female hostess’) who live-broadcast themselves and get paid by online followers for their gendered and sexualised professional performances and/or mundane life activities, including singing, eating or chatting (with online followers) in front of the web camera. Although these ‘cam girls’ seem to ‘pander to spectators in order to receive [monetary] gifts and other favours’, female livestreamers are often able to ‘maintain control of their representations and develop a form of power by the ways they become visible’. In this sense, female livestreams are not necessarily subject to men’s gazes but instead subjectively perform or ‘transgress designated genres and gender stereotypes in order to gain popularity’. This gendered process

168 Zhang and Hjorth, ‘Live-streaming’, p. 3.
169 Ibid., p. 4
170 Ibid., p. 3, p. 6.
172 Ibid., p. 57.
was well manifested in the 2016 *SVG* celebrities’ queer performances and personas.

At the end of 2015, HTV announced that *SVG* would be produced and broadcast as an entirely Internet-based show in 2016. The 2016 *SVG* was aired on Hunan Broadcasting System’s online broadcaster Mango TV between 12 March 2016 and 3 September 2016 (fig. 3.31). Most episodes and popular scenes were also uploaded to the 2016 *SVG* official YouTube channel. One preliminary selection platform, ‘The Virtual General Competition’ (*yun haixuan*), was added to the show, allowing participants to perform live and interact with the judges via live-streaming websites. In addition, online voting largely replaced the text-message voting feature of the show. This convergence of an online platform and participatory media on the show not only enhanced to a large degree the immediacy and interactivity of the contest but also encouraged many Chinese Internet celebrities, including some female livestreamers famous for their androgynous personas or transgender performances on other liver-streaming sites, to participate in the show’s preliminary selections.

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174 This transformation of *SVG* in 2016 craftily worked around a series of bans and regulations regarding provincial station-produced talent shows. For example, in early 2006, SARFT banned the airing of regional competitions on such shows, which negatively affected ‘the ratings of the national finals and the gradual buildup of audience attachment’. See Yang, ‘Reality Talent Shows’, p. 521. Later, in 2007, SARFT issued revised regulations regarding *SVG*-style shows by shortening such shows’ airing time per episode and the length of the entire competition per season. Moreover, it restricted the voting rights to the audience in the live studios, which further reduced the enthusiasm of TV viewers and fans and the profits that shows of this kind generated. See Ibid.

175 The show’s YouTube channel is available here: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRz2q_Q5hEko-kmCE2KKM3w
Moreover, the 2016 season also appropriated an inter-Asian androgynous pop trend derived from K-pop to further ‘depoliticise’, if not erase, the lesbian connotation of the queer stardom manufactured in the show. In particular, it invited a male, ethnic Chinese celebrity, Kris Wu (Wu Yifan),\textsuperscript{176} to serve as its first image representative (figs. 3.32 and 3.33). Wu became a celebrity after participating in the 2007 season of S.M. Entertainment Global Auditions, a global-scale talent show produced by a South Korea-based agency. After being recruited by the company, Wu received years of training in South Korea as the leader of the musical group EXO. He is now established as a typical beautiful, androgynous, cosmopolitan male idol. Due to these experiences, Wu embodies the classic ‘huameinan’ (flower-like beautiful man) style of male East Asian pop idols.

\textsuperscript{176} Wu is a Chinese-born celebrity with Canadian nationality.
Figure 3.32: A poster for the 2016 SVG celebrity representative, androgynous male star Kris Wu.

Figure 3.33: An official campaign image of the 2016 SVG, featuring androgynous male star Kris Wu.

Timothy Laurie notes that K-pop commercialises androgynous celebrities through ‘a relatively narrow spectrum of gendered and raced bodies’.\textsuperscript{177} These beautiful yet androgynous male K-pop idols often ‘have pretty facial features and slim and attractive body shapes’.\textsuperscript{178} However, their ‘effeminate


\textsuperscript{178} Oh, ‘Queering Spectatorship in K-Pop’, p. 63.
appearance … does not mean the stars have feminine personalities or identities that match their appearance. Such androgyny evoked by feminine behaviour or effeminate appearance is not linked to homosexuality, as it would be in the West.'\(^{179}\) In this line, Wu serves as an excellent example of the beautiful androgynous men created by the East Asian pop cultural industry, who possess an ‘aesthetic, delicate, flamboyant, yet masculine’ public persona.\(^ {180}\) His star image does not signal homosexuality but rather symbolises a unique kind of beauty in this inter-Asian context. Inviting Wu to be the show’s celebrity representative (and later to be a celebrity judge and mentor who trained as well as performed with some of the contestants during the competition) reveals the 2016 SVG producers’ obvious intentions to play with performed queer personas while paradoxically drawing a clear line between on-screen gender nonnormativities (of both male and female East Asian celebrities) and real-life non-heterosexual identities.

In addition, appropriating diverse reality TV formats and merging various media platforms that help explore and promote this type of queer pop celebrity persona in its participants, the 2016 SVG carried queer sensationalism to the extreme. The construction of the queer stardom of Poison (Du Yao), an extremely popular androgynous participant in the 2016 season, is a revealing case (fig. 3.34).

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179 Ibid., p. 64.
Before Poison’s participation in *SVG*, she was known as ‘the best Chinese female livestreamer’ on the famous Chinese live-streaming website YY.com. As a livestreamer, Poison live-broadcasts singing performances for her followers, and her fans can pay her directly and request songs for her to sing. On YY.com, she dresses like a traditionally feminine girl with long hair and exquisite makeup most of the time (fig. 3.35). To present her feminine persona on the site, not only does she wear girly dresses but her live-stream studio also highly resembles ‘the spatiality of a very “stereotypically girly” room’, featuring wallpaper in baby pink and blue colours and decorated with many symbolic images of East Asian femininity and cuteness, such as Hello Kitty and Doraemon dolls. Nevertheless, Poison is also famous for her impersonation of male or transgender characters and often accepts fan requests for her to sing songs written for masculine male singers (fig. 3.36). For instance, she once cross-dressed as well-known Chinese transgender media character Invincible East (*Dongfang Bubai*), who was portrayed in the original Hong Kong film as a cis male who castrated himself to become an indefectible swordsman in Ming-Dynasty China. This and other transgender appearances of Poison during her live performances on YY.com won her a lot of followers. Yet, like most online celebrities in China, her fame was limited to her fans on the site, and she was not known as a celebrity in the entertainment media industry before her participation on the 2016 *SVG*.

181 The website is available here: http://ent.qq.com/a/20160118/034843.htm.
During Poison’s first audition for a place among the top 100 participants of 2016 SVG, she sported short, boyish hair and covered her feminine curves with a long black trench coat, slim black jeans and military-style boots. The professional SVG judges in the live studio, who had seen her look backstage, could not stop praising her ‘extremely beautiful’ tomboyish look even before she walked on stage. One judge directly compared her look with that of another popular tomboyish participant in the 2006 SVG, Li Na. After Poison’s performance, the judges resumed their compliments of her tomboyish persona, despite her controversial singing ability. One judge, a famous male Taiwanese musician, commented, ‘Poison, you can be male or female. You are a creature of male and female born into the same body (cixiongtongti). [You embody] boys’ handsomeness and girls’ prettiness at the same time. Very unique!’ Subsequently, another judge, a Mainland-based Chinese fashion magazine editor, added, ‘She is exactly the type our show is looking for. She has a domineering style (baqi) on stage and the indispensable persona

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**Figure 3.35:** A picture of Poison in her hyper-feminine persona as a female livestreamer on YY.com.

**Figure 3.36:** A screen capture of Poison impersonating the transgender character Invincible East of the Hong Kong martial arts film *Swordsman II*.\(^{182}\)

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\(^{182}\) The Hong Kong film *Swordsman II* (dir. Tsui Hark, 1993) was adapted from the Sinophone martial arts novel originally written by the novelist Louis Cha between 1967 and 1969. The image of Invincible East impersonated by Poison is largely based on the character portrayed in the film. Yet, it should be noted that the film character was not from the original fiction but ‘borrowed’ from Hong Kong artist Ma Wing-shing’s comis series, *Fung Wan.*
of a celebrity (*mingxing xiang*). Very pretty facial features’. These comments, delivered by entertainment media professionals in various Chinese-speaking regions, especially the one referencing back to a celebrity the show created ten years ago, elevated and refashioned the ‘zhongxing’ (the ability to enact both male and female genders, quite different from the same term used in Hong Kong and Taiwan) personas of its participants able to exhibit both desirable masculine and feminine gender traits and appearances as a celebrity quality, which the Chinese media industry has been persistently searching for and capitalising on over the years.

This valorisation of the *zhongxing* quality of SVG’s participants also encouraged Poison to exhibit her ability to perform different gendered personas on the show. Later, in another episode of the show, Poison surprised the judges and her fans by wearing a long wig and a short, school-uniform-style shirt and performing as a cute, sexy, hyper-feminine, hip-pop girl (fig. 3.37). This intentionally feminised performance from Poison substantiates the performativeness of her gendered personas on the show. After the performance, one judge, despite criticising her singing, highly praised her feminine look and compared it to that of Fan Bingbing, a successful, influential Mainland Chinese actress with a positive reputation worldwide. Notably, Fan often plays the role of a hypersexualised, feminine, heterosexual woman in her films and TV shows, yet she is also known for her ‘manly’ characteristics in her professional and personal lives, such as independence, a strong work ethic, generosity, unyieldingness and toughness. This analogy drawn by the judge distinguishes the gendered personas of female celebrities displayed in different occasions from their real-life sexualities and relegates these nonnormative personas to valuable qualities in female stars’ professional and private lives. It also implies the ability to possess and present both desirable masculine and feminine traits as a necessity for successful Mainland Chinese female celebrities.

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183 For details of the scene, see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ng7Cf_eHHc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ng7Cf_eHHc).
Figure 3.37: A screen capture of Poison in her feminine persona on the 2016 SVG.

This highly ambiguous, sometimes self-contradictory, queer play with gendered personas can also be found in the show’s framing of the intimacy between the participants. In early May 2016, the top 20 national finalists were asked to move to the ‘Girl Academy’ (nüsheng xueyuan) for six weeks (fig. 3.38). This section of the show was a reality TV-style training camp where the participants live, study and take singing tests together. This format was inspired by the UK’s hybridised talent show Fame Academy, which combined ‘features found in the Big Brother and Idol formats’.184 All the scenes in SVG’s ‘Academy’ were live-streamed daily between 9:00 a.m. and 11:59 p.m. They involved several classic ‘Academy’-format components, including ‘a series of weekly concerts [and group tasks] in which contestants compete[d] both for the audience vote and for the judge’s approval’; weekly interviews and monologues, which allowed the participants to narrate their experiences in the Academy; and daily, documentary-style scenes captured by the hidden cameras in the training, dining and living rooms and bedrooms at the Academy, which were presented ‘as a diary of the contestants living and working together while they [trained and prepared] for their performances’.185 These combined features and formulas of the ‘Academy’ section ‘fuse[d] the private and public representations’186 of the participants’ social lives and exposed their daily encounters to the show’s online audience.

184 Turner, Ordinary People, p. 58
185 Ibid.
186 Longstaff, ‘From Reality to Fantasy’, p. 74.
This hybrid, live-streaming format in the 2016 SVG not only largely enhanced ‘the voyeuristic dimensions’\(^{187}\) of the show but also greatly contributed to the queer makings of the extensively homosocial environment at the Academy. In particular, the Academy was set up in a castle-like, Disneyland-style resort (figs. 3.39 and 3.40). The fantastical and non-Chinese design of the Academy manufactured a self-secluded, female homosocial environment and further contributed to the creation of a homoerotic wonderland that intensified the queer ambience surrounding the 2016 SVG participants yet also distanced the queer intimacies and fantasies created inside the Academy from the outside, real-world, normative Chinese society.

\(^{187}\) Turner, *Ordinary People.*
Figure 3.39: A picture of the Academy showcasing its interior castle-like decoration.

Figure 3.40: A picture of a bedroom at the Academy, showing that it is decorated in the colours of baby pink and blue. This combination of the often gendered two colours (While pink is often considered a delicate and feminine colour; blue is more frequently associated with strength and masculinity) can also be seen as a way to promote androgyny on the show.

For instance, the participants were ordered to rehearse a staged play at the Academy, for which the official couples in this season were assigned the roles of heterosexual couples in romantic love stories. The tomboyish participants were asked to play the male roles. During the rehearsal, the camera for live-streaming the show was set under the stage and resembled both the play director’s and the live audience’s viewpoints of the scene on the stage. The director’s comments and critiques of some participants’ acting constantly interrupted the participants’ performances, which ironically reminded the audience that the play, though featuring romantic stories between SVG female participants, was just a constructed, repeatedly rehearsed fictional show. During the game-playing segments of their acting training at the Academy, some tomboyish participants were also asked to show the audience how to ‘seduce girls’ (liaomei). To accomplish this task, they eventually performed kissing each other on the lips (fig. 3.41).
Moreover, during their media interviews and online interactions with viewers and fans, some official couples from the 2016 season were often caught on camera hugging and kissing each other in an unrestrained, homoerotic manner. Some feminine contestants in these official couples referred to their ‘masculine friends’ or ‘sisters’ on the show as their ‘husbands’ (*laogong*). In one online video posted on the show’s official YouTube channel, for example, hyper-feminine participant Wang Jinjin sat on Poison’s lap and kissed her on the lips. Wang also frequently called Poison her husband in front of the camera. Some of their fans who interacted with them online during the interviews also celebrated the live-streaming of the homoerotic intimacy between Wang and Poison and encouraged the two to be more explicit about their ‘friendship’ on the show.\(^{188}\) The online viewers also used the interactive, ‘commentary sharing’ technology, ‘bullet curtain’ (*danmu*) widely supported by many Chinese video-streaming sites to input their queer readings of the two celebrities.\(^{189}\) And then, the comments ‘scroll[led] across the screen in real time’ while the video was playing or live-streamed.\(^{190}\) Some fans also edited and photoshopped the videos by superimposing comments directly on the images. For instance, as shown in Figure 3.42, the Chinese

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\(^{188}\) See the responses from queer-friendly viewers and fans to the show’s intentional coupling of Wang and Poison at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwf2XFSJU70


\(^{190}\) Ibid.
letters on the screen capture are queer comments from the two celebrities’ fans, which means ‘the Academy is full of official couples’.

Abundant similar homoerotic footage featuring other official couples at the Academy can be found in this season (fig. 3.43). Even after the show ended, the show’s producers also often re-edited and remade some of the scenes into music videos featuring certain official couples. These videos constantly played with and blurred the boundaries between female friendship and female homoerotic intimacy. For example, on 12 September 2016, a video appeared on the show’s official YouTube channel of two very intimate contestants, Zhang Xiaoyu and Huang Xiyuan, celebrating their close friendship.\footnote{See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IXByX5Ewqs} A few days later, on 16 September 2016, another video was posted on the SVG channel, accompanied by a Taiwanese romantic pop song, ‘Love Master’ (Lian’ai Daren). The video displayed images of the two living at the Academy as intimate lovers, looking after and caring for each other.\footnote{See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_Xv7aF0kK0}
When questioned about their relationships and sexualities after the end of the show, almost all the participants responded ambiguously. For example, after the 2016 SVG contest, the host in an Internet-based talk show asked Poison whether she likes girls or boys. Poison answered slyly, saying, ‘Girls!’ After seeing the host’s shocked face and hearing a lot of female fans screaming at her unexpected ‘coming out’ in the studio, she immediately but jocularly informed the audience that she meant she would prefer to have daughters if she had children later in her life. This clarification from Poison awkwardly normalises her private self as a gender-nonnormative (or gender-fluid) yet (implied heterosexual) motherly woman. This form of disidentification with non-heterosexuality by reconfirming their normative roles and/or desires as mother and wife can also be found in the case of trans talk show host Jin (Chapter Three). Yet, different from Jin’s self-normalisation of her trans identity through a combined rhetoric of neoliberalism and patriotism, the SVG participants’ vague, even irreverent and pejorative, responses to being questioning about their sexualities may also be partly explained by their fear of being demonised and excluded by the media industry for their ‘different’ sexualities. These queer discourses surrounding the 2016 SVG participants’ genders and sexualities disappointingly mark a social reality where ordinary females can become celebrities for their performed gender and sexual nonnormativities but need

193 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VD7qAgZkwXo
to constantly negate non-heterosexual identification. Nevertheless, they also point to a form of negotiative queer agency and power of these celebrities and their fans played out and within a still heteronormative Chinese society that cannot be fully understood through either confrontational Western LGBTQ politics or a generalised inter-Asian zhongxing framework.

7. Conclusion: a queer, ‘de-lesbianised’ reality TV

This chapter has discussed the queer transformation and celebrity culture of the Mainland Chinese-based reality singing contest SVG in the last decade. Delving into its celebrities’ gendered personas and sometimes homoeroticised performances on the show, my analysis has explored the ways its queer cultural discourses and stardoms were produced, negotiated and circulated. Situating my investigation of the show’s queerness in the Mainland-specific reality TV context of the 21 century, my readings of the cultural-televisual techniques employed by the show have demonstrated a depoliticised queer stardom in which the distinction between a heteronormative reality where Chinese lesbians can hardly survive discrimination and silencing and a lighthearted entertainment world that exploits and profits from queer female images has been constantly contested and redrawn.

This de-lesbianising tendency can also be detected through a brief review of the change in its online queer fan cultures. Although SVG queer fan practices have flourished since 2005, research has recorded evidence of conflicts within online SVG fan communities caused by some fans’ queer readings of SVG tomboyish contestants in 2005 and 2006.194 For instance, my own previous observation of the 2006 SVG queer fan practices in Chinese cyberspace showed that, even within these queer-themed online fandoms, downplaying and self-silencing rumours of tomboyish participants’ lesbianism was quite common.195 Meanwhile, various kinds of hierarchy and discrimination still existed within its online queer fan communities. For

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195 Zhao, ‘Fandom as a Middle Ground’. 
example, queer fans who took the depictions of on-screen female intimacy between participants too seriously and viewed them as real-life ‘lesbian events’ were often ridiculed by other queer fans who only viewed these queer fantasies as fictional dramas.\textsuperscript{196} Topics related to lesbianism in the real world and opinions voiced by self-identified lesbian fans were often ignored and ostracised within its queer fandoms. Nevertheless, my findings also indicated that such self-contradictory, ambiguous attitudes toward lesbianism among 2005 and 2006 \textit{SVG} queer fans are not necessarily manifestations of homophobia.\textsuperscript{197} Instead, they might have been caused by some queer fans’ knowledge that celebrities, communities or cultures unambiguously associated with lesbianism are often pathologised and despised in mainstream Chinese society. Thus, this queer fan culture tended to emphasise the playful, fictional features of fans’ queer fantasies about their idols.

Although the queering of female masculinity became blatant in the latest season of \textit{SVG}, similar cultural hierarchies and worries surrounding queer fantasies and real-world lesbianism can still be found in its online fandom. Take, for example, one of the show’s official fan sites, \textit{SVG Post Bar} (\textit{chaoji niu sheng tieba}; fig. 3.44).\textsuperscript{198} This site, founded in 2004, has long served as a major gathering point for \textit{SVG} fans to discuss and gossip about the show’s participants. It was not originally a queer-focused fandom and queer readings were not common practices on this fan site. By 22 November 2017, it had more than 956,000 threads, above 12,358,000 posts, and over 106,000 followers.

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{198} The fan site is available from: http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%E8%B6%85%E7%BA%A7%E5%A5%B3%E5%A3%B0&ie=utf-8
The visible transformations of *SVG Post Bar* over the past decade exemplifies a ‘mass queer’ (*quanmin ku’er*) pop culture perpetuated by both the general public’s increased awareness of Chinese LGBTQ public cultures and the ubiquitous queer sentiments presented on the show. For instance, many self-identified female fans on the site constantly expressed their admiration for the handsomeness of some 2016 *SVG* tomboyish contestants. Some of the fans playfully claimed that they were willing to turn gay for these idols. Meanwhile, terms used in Chinese lesbian and gay cultures, such as ‘bent’ (*baiwan*, which means ‘being turned homosexual’), ‘top’ (*gong*), ‘bottom’ (*shou*), ‘stone butch’ (*tie T*), and ‘handsome butch’ (*shuai T*), were frequently used in fan discussions devoted to the 2016 *SVG* participants on the site. Seemingly, queer readings in *SVG* fan subculture have become more prevalent, ‘mainstreamed’ and welcomed. Nevertheless, during fan discussions, most fans highly appreciated beautiful androgynous (or *zhongxing*) participants who could perform both traditionally feminine and nonnormatively tomboyish personas, such as Poison. In contrast, hyper-masculine participants, who were able to pass as heterosexual men in public spaces and thus exhibit a higher degree of gender nonnormativity, were often criticised and ridiculed by some fans on the site. Moreover, when some contestants’ female masculinity served as a visible marker for their real-life lesbian identities, this form of masculine persona was often deemed as a ‘bad’ type or a shortcoming.
For instance, in one thread titled ‘This world cannot stop handsome tomboys; 
*SVG* participant Zhou Chenxi’, the thread creator pointed out that 2016 *SVG* participant Zhou is a handsome masculine lesbian celebrity who was featured in an advertisement for the well-known lesbian social-networking app ‘The L’ (also known as Rela in China; fig. 3.45). 199 Some fans replied under the thread that Zhou looks too much like a man or seems to be ‘neither man nor woman’ (*bunan bunü*). Some other fans were so shocked to learn Zhou’s lesbian identity that they joked that other *zhongxing SVG* participants would look ‘traditionally’ feminine and beautiful compared to Zhou. These fan reactions deliver a hierarchical logic which celebrates female androgyny yet disapproves of and stigmatises female masculinities associated with real-life lesbianism.

![Figure 3.45: The advertisement for the lesbian dating app, ‘The L’, which featured the tomboyish *SVG* participant Zhou Chenxi.](image)

These findings from the 2016 *SVG* fan culture, to a certain degree, verify my observation of the 2016 *SVG* as an epitome of the perverse matrix formed in today’s heteronormatively structured, mainstream Chinese media and pop cultural spaces. As I have used *SVG* as a case study to explicate, contemporary Chinese queer pop culture has persistently showcased an on-screen capitalisation and fantatisation of cross-dressing performances, transgender personas and same-sex bonding and intimacy. It, though heavily shaped by and entangled with inter-Asian, cross-regional, and global pop

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199 The thread is available at: [http://tieba.baidu.com/p/4401421238?pn=1](http://tieba.baidu.com/p/4401421238?pn=1)
cultural flows (Western reality TV formats and East Asian pop cultures, in this case), tactically distances itself from the LGBTQ identity politics of the nonfictional world yet contradictorily draws on and celebrates the omnipresent queer potential, desires and articulations of media producers, performers and consumers with diverse gender, sexual, and sociocultural identities and interests. While SVG’s case has stipulated the capitalist power of androgynous images and queer fandom in the past decade, the celebrity impersonation show analyzed in the following chapter will expose the unsettling potential of on-screen queer personas and performances in sustaining and circulating the often intertwined patriarchal-centered nationalism and Han-Chinese centrum on today’s formatted TV.
Chapter Four

Parodying gender through a global queer gaze: cross-gender performances in the celebrity impersonation show *Your Face Sounds Familiar*

1. Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, the hype around Chinese reality TV generated by a number of exceptionally successful singing competitions, such as *SVG* and *Happy Voice Boy*, has significantly transformed Mainland China’s entertainment media landscape. Since 2005, the Chinese TV industry has entered a seemingly participatory age, which has enabled the general public to feel as if they partaking in the process of manufacturing, selecting and training stars. It is notable that a surprisingly large number of TV celebrities, especially pop singers with androgynous personas who used to be ‘ordinary’ people, were transformed into rising stars by these talent show franchises. Nevertheless, this ‘participatory’ character of Chinese reality TV has not simply led to a straightforward democratisation of Chinese society over the past decade. As Chinese media scholar Hui Faye Xiao’s 2006 research shows, the androgy nous images of young female celebrities on TV were often shaped by both local capitalist and globalist political-ideological forces, while the emotions of the shows’ viewers and fans were exploited by a Chinese-specific neoliberal logic. The nuances of this ambivalence surrounding queer representations on Chinese reality TV have been thoroughly explored and problematised in Chapter Three. In this chapter, I move onto an examination of celebrity competition shows, another subgenre of reality TV that has flourished in China in recent years.

Celebrity reality competitions usually invite celebrities who are established—or at least known to some local audiences—as singers, comedians, artists or movie or TV stars, to participate as contestants in a form of competition. My

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examination focuses on the most sensational, queerly charged form of this genre: celebrity impersonation competitions. I interrogate the persistent bargaining between televisual representations of cross-gender (and sometimes also interethnic and/or transcultural) performances and local, intersected normative ideals of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality. In Chapter Two, I have discussed in detail the neoliberal, nationalistic discourses embedded in the talk show host Jin Xing’s quasi-feminist, post-trans persona. My investigation of celebrity impersonation shows inspects the ways in which the glocalisation of queer-natured TV formats, images and acts negotiated with, if not promoted and sustained, the essentialised ideal images of China underpinned by a range of gender, sexual, ethnic and class-based hierarchies and discriminations (more specifically, through a Chinese-specific post-feminist frame).

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the ‘impersonation show’ (mofang xiu) is a concept imported from the West that first appeared in the Chinese TV industry in the late 1990s. One of the most well received impersonation programmes in recent years entails celebrities impersonating iconic public figures and media characters. This form of celebrity competition often involves cross-gender performances and theatrical styles of singing and dancing. The celebrity impersonation show Your Face Sounds Familiar (Baibian Daka Xiu; HTV, China, 2012–2014; YFSF hereafter; fig. 4.1) is granted particular analytical attention in this chapter. This show featured highly gendered, comedic performances and competitions, which made it one of the most innovative and successful Chinese celebrity talent programmes of the first half of the 2010s.
YFSF was adapted from the Spanish show *Tu Cara Me Suena* that was also adapted in many other countries, including Greece, Italy and Turkey. The Chinese version differed from other foreign adaptations insofar as it invited mostly Chinese-speaking celebrities to perform hyperbolic cross-gender impersonations of iconic stars. In fact, the tradition of impersonating stars and media characters through cross-gender performances in a Chinese-speaking context is closely associated with local Chinese, East Asian and Western cultural practices, such as *fanchuan* (cross-dressing acts commonly seen in Chinese-speaking operas), cosplay, karaoke, *egao* (the Chinese version of culture jamming) and drag.

As Judith Butler explains in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, ‘gender parody’ refers to gendered enactments, including but not limited to cross-dressing performances, that unmask the fact that ‘the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin’. As Helene A. Shugart reminds us in her study of the American sitcom *Ellen* (ABC, USA, 1994-1998), Butler’s theorisation of gender demonstrates that given the collective, cultural mystified consciousness that assumes the naturalness of gender, [some] individuals are castigated in various and sundry ways for their ‘unnatural’ behaviour. Examples of ‘inappropriate’ gender performances might include women who refuse to wear make up or “dress nicely”, men who are ‘overly emotional’, or the awkward, sometimes painful attempts of women and men to emulate ‘ideal’ femininity and masculinity respectively. In each of these cases, the subjects are constructed as deviant, at best, or failure, at worst.

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5 Most of the time, the show only invited Chinese-speaking celebrities. Throughout its five seasons, it only had several famous non-Chinese stars to perform, such as the Malaysian singer Shila Amzah, the South Korean singer Lee Chae Yeon and the Thai pop star Pchy. These non-Chinese celebrities are either widely known to the Chinese audience or can understand Chinese. They either served as judges or impersonated stars of the same gender on the show.
6 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 188.
Shugart also adds that Butler’s conceptualisation of gender parody can apply to ‘cases in which gender is consciously performed by someone whose biological sex conforms to the prescribed gender being enacted’, such as a cis female consciously imitating certain feminine gender traits in comedic ways. Using the boyish (later openly lesbian) female character of the sitcom, Ellen Morgan (specifically, her performing of femininity in the show) as an example, Shugart argues that some forms of gender parody might involve ‘subversive performance that intentionally points up the constructed nature of gender’ and engage ‘the strategies of conspicuous performance, contextual incongruities, and excess’ in order to ‘denaturalize gender and challenge heterosexist desire’.8

Drawing on both Butler’s original theorisation and Shugart’s extended application of Butler’s theory in analysing TV images of female parodic performances, I consider the hyperbolic gendered, and often cross-gendered, impersonations in YFSF as a televised form of gender parody. My use of the term ‘cross-gender’ does not necessarily describe a reversal of gender roles (e.g., hypermasculine performances or personas by cis females) but can also denote ‘unnatural’ gendered performances that transgress the normative boundaries associated with ethnicity, class and geopolitics (e.g., white hyper-femininity enacted by ethnic Chinese women). In this sense, I use ‘cross-gender’ to highlight that in the dominant gender/sex system of mainstream society, intersected crossings of sociocultural lines in gender performances help to both unveil and maintain the inherent entanglement and mutual shaping of identity-based norms regarding gender, class, ethnicity and nationality. Meanwhile, I do not use the term gender parody (or gender-parodic/parodying) exclusively to describe the comedic effects produced by cross-gender performances. Instead, the ‘parodic’ can also come from gender performances’ cultural interventions into the normative ideals.

8 Ibid., p. 96.
9 Ibid.
More specifically, my reading of the gender parody in *YFSF* inspects the ways in which the show’s cross-gender performances appropriated nonnormatively gendered elements and styles from contemporary Western and Asian pop cultures, such as drag, cosplay (also known as costume play, a form of fannish role-playing that originated in Japan, which involves fans wearing makeup and costumes to imitate pop culture icons, such as anime characters or pop stars) and theatrical, gendered scenes from Chinese performing arts and folklore. By this means, the show constructed and offered its audience a Chinese-specific ‘global (queer) gaze’. That is, a self-contradictory gaze simultaneously allowed gender-parodic performances on TV and reasserted the normatively gendered, modernised images of China in a transcultural context. I also examine how *YFSF* repackaged these supposedly gender-norm-defying cultures into a celebrity reality competition format. I illustrate that *YFSF* constantly revised its televisual formulas and segment arrangements throughout its five seasons. By carefully manipulating the visual-cultural-symbolic gestures and techniques, *YFSF* realised a ‘re-normalisation’ of the celebrities’ cross-gender impersonations, in which its gender parodies menaced gender-related binary logics by reproducing certain sociocultural hierarchies and ideals inscribed in these problematic binaries.

In the rest of this chapter, I first discuss the formation of the Chinese-specific global queer gaze on TV through a brief survey of the history and current characteristics of celebrity reality TV and celebrity impersonation TV programmes in China, as well as the impersonation practices appropriated in *YFSF*. Furthermore, I provide a close reading of the televisual styles of *YFSF* that transformed the show’s cross-gender impersonations into an entertaining, yet also often norm-referencing, type of Chinese queer spectacle. As noted by Fengshu Liu, contemporary Chinese women are expected to ‘construct “modern” womanhood within a context of multiple and conflicting gender discourses’, which ‘reflects a particular Chinese “dual” approach to modernity that defines a standard/western notion of modern girlhood’. In line with Liu’s viewpoint, I then present a feminist reading of several

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representative sequences and performances from YFSF that featured two popular Mainland Chinese female celebrities, Qu Ying and Jia Ling. My analysis starts with an analysis of the two celebrities’ often opposite star personas (as ‘goddess’ and ‘manly lady’, respectively) carefully framed in a Chinese-specific postfeminist pop culture. Film scholar Victor Fan finds in his study of the star persona and feminised spectatorship of the Hollywood film franchise, Twilight (Catherine Hardwicke, Temple Hill Entertainment, USA, 2008) that ‘[i]f “global Hollywood” depends on the mutual to-be-looked-at-ness between Hollywood and the global, female and male, and queer and heteronormative, such appearance of mutual dependency is also symptomatic of a deep mutual distrust’.

Fan argues that through a ‘process of intersubjective negotiation between the spectators and the film, the business, and the marketplace, … contemporary Hollywood films manage symptoms of gender and political asymmetries in the contribution of their real or imagined “feminized” spectatorship’. Following Fan’s view, I reveal a similar mutual dependency and mutual distrust in YFSF’s representations of non-Chinese gendered images, exemplified in Qu and Jia’s duet cross-gender impersonations, that points to a cultural hierarchy and othering within a modern, global China fantasy. I illustrate that the show constantly deployed certain ideological-theatrical technologies, such as incorporating Mainland China’s postfeminist ideas and othering—even demonising—non-ethnic-Chinese people and cultures within transnational, interethnic contexts. This form of televisualisation of Chinese ‘female modernisation’ reflected the official culture’s dual ‘expectations for women to be independent, knowledgeable and competent’ while possessing both certain traditional and contemporary Chinese feminine ideals, such as performing ‘gentleness, dutifulness as wives and mothers and female beauty/elegant appearance

12 Ibid., p. 32.
based on both inner self-cultivation and smart commercial choice’. In this way, the show stigmatised and negated nonnormatively gendered, sexualised and ethnicised bodies and personas that do not meet these mainstream sociocultural expectations. Ultimately, I argue that while queer (and sometimes feminist) sentiments and subjectivities did emerge in these televvisual moments of gender-parodic impersonation, the queering of the televvisual space was achieved through the arbitrary promotion and persistent citation of a normative, essentialised identity—an ideally gendered, sexually heteronormative, ethnic-Chinese womanhood.

2. A Chinese-specific global (queer) gaze

2.1. Impersonation and celebrity-participation reality TV in China

Impersonation (mofang) practices in contemporary Chinese pop culture can be traced back to the importation and popularisation of karaoke. Originating in Japan in the 1970s, karaoke enables people to sing songs into a handheld microphone, accompanied by a videotape (or video compact disc) playing the songs’ original instrumental music and showing the lyrics on a TV screen in a karaoke booth or a bar. With developments in audio-visual technologies during the 1980s, this form of entertainment swept across Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Many karaoke lovers chose to sing famous songs of their idols or used karaoke to train as amateur singers. As Tanyue Qi’s 2015 research shows, this led to the first wave of impersonation TV shows in Mainland China between 1998 and 2003. Impersonation shows during this period often featured ordinary people who looked or sang like superstars performing for an audience as a form of audio-visual spectacle.


The first Mainland Chinese variety TV show to feature an impersonation segment (mofang huanjie) was *Happy 100* (*Kaixin 100*; SETV, China, 1998–2011; fig. 4.2). The show was a ‘weekend prime-time’ (zhoumo huangjindang)\(^ {17} \) entertainment programme, which maintained a high rating for most of its thirteen-year run.\(^ {18} \) Its impersonation segment, entitled ‘Happy Star Face’ (*Kaixin Mingxing Lian*), was so well-received that it later became the separate impersonation programme *Super Star* (*Chaoji Mingxing*; SETV, China, 2008–present).\(^ {19} \) *Happy 100* often invited Taiwanese pop stars to participate as impersonation judges in the show, and in November 2009, *Super Star* held its first competition to select an impersonation king from across the Taiwan Strait area (*Liang’an Mofang Guanjun Wang*).\(^ {20} \)

\(^ {17} \) Shows labelled as ‘weekend prime-time’ ones are often broadcast in the prime-time slot on every Sunday (or Saturday) and rebroadcast on Saturday (or Sunday) of the following week. The broadcasting time can be varied.

\(^ {18} \) The show was broadcast at 8:20 p.m. and had been reformatted several times before its final episode on 3 April 2011. It was said to be a ‘milestone’ in the history of Mainland Chinese variety TV. For details, see ‘*Kaixin 100*’, *Baidu Baike* <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%BC%80%E5%BF%83100>, accessed 20 December 2017.

\(^ {19} \) See ‘*Chaoji Mingxing*’, *Baidu Baike* <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%B6%85%E7%BA%A7%E6%98%8E%E6%98%9F/10418245?fr=aladdin>, accessed 20 December 2017. The show was aired by SETV, which is a provincial station based in Fujian province, a region of Mainland China that is geoculturally and linguistically close to Taiwan. The programmes produced and broadcast by SETV are often characterised by ‘the distinguishing features of the Taiwan Strait’ (*taihai tese*), which refers to meanings shared by the peoples and cultures on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. This cultural traversal of geopolitical boundaries is also reflected in SETV’s variety shows. See ‘*Dongnan Weishi*’, *Baidu Baike* <http://www.baike.com/wiki%E4%B8%8E%E5%8D%97%E5%8D%AB%E8%A7%86&prd=button_doc_jinru>, accessed 1 December 2017. This feature denies the independence of Taiwan and advocates that Taiwan remains a ‘province’ of China. Thus, it can be seen as a form of the PRC government’s ideological propaganda toward ‘Taiwan Issue’.

In 1999, after the exceptional success of *Happy 100*, a number of provincial stations began to produce impersonation shows and variety programmes with a significant impersonation segment. The most successful of these was the Sunday prime-time variety programme *Joy Mobilisation* (*Huanle Zongdongyuan*; BTV, China, 1999–2006; fig. 4.3), which featured an impersonation competition segment entitled ‘Super Impersonation Show’ (*Chaoji Mofang Xiu*).\(^2^1\) For this segment of the show, participants were invited to perform singing and dancing performances impersonating their idols. After rounds of weekly and seasonal competitions, the winners were selected to receive professional training and release records under the mentorship of famous music producers.

![Figure 4.3: A screen capture of the show *Joy Mobilisation*, which featured an impersonation competition segment that allowed the general public to impersonate stars. It later gave rise to the *Idol*-style singing competition shows in China.](image)

Nevertheless, as a prototype of star-manufacturing shows, these earlier Mainland Chinese impersonation TV programmes and segments did not\(^{2^1}\) This segment was cancelled in 2005 due to a decline in its rating.
feature many hyperbolic cross-gender performances. The impersonation contest on *Joy Mobilisation* also creatively combined impersonation and talent competition formats, an innovation that eventually gave rise to the *Idol*-style reality singing contests that began in China during 2003. In the meantime, the impersonation segment of *Joy Mobilisation* gradually lost its popularity. As discussed in Chapter Three, the queer pleasure the singing competition *SVG* offered to its audience and fans made the show the most successful programme in Chinese TV history. Almost a decade after the first wave of impersonation shows in China, when the popularity of the often queerly charged reality singing competitions had declined, the rise of celebrity reality TV was seen in China.

This boom in celebrity reality TV shows in post-2010 China can be partly explained by a shift in the ways that stars are manufactured in the contemporary Chinese entertainment industry. As Qi’s research shows, the industry has become saturated with pop stars manufactured by reality competitions over the past decade. Many of the stars lost their fame quickly after the competitions ended, mainly because the agencies and music labels affiliated with these talent shows were unwilling to put much time and effort into properly training and promoting so many ‘ordinary’, ‘less talented’ stars. In response to this industry trend, a growing number of formatted reality TV programmes since the late 2000s, rather than searching for new stars, began to feature already established public figures who were willing to

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22 Taiwanese entertainment media had a significant influence on Mainland Chinese TV culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and both *Happy 100* and *Joy Mobilisation* copied ideas and formats from Taiwanese variety programmes. One of these Taiwanese shows was *Guess Guess Guess* (*Wocai Wocai Wocaicai*; CTV, Taiwan, 1996–2012), which featured a similar ‘Star Face’ segment. While Taiwanese impersonation segments often featured gender-parodic performances and transgender celebrities at the time, Mainland Chinese impersonation shows rarely did so before 2003. This might be explained by the relatively queer-friendly sociocultural atmosphere of Taiwan (as I discussed in Chapter four) and the popularity of *fanchuan* performances in modern and contemporary Taiwan (the Redtop Arts, which I briefly mention later in this chapter).

23 The rise of Chinese *Idol*-style talent shows was marked by the first season of *Super Voice Boy* (*Chaoji Nansheng*; HTV, China) in 2003. In 2003, *Joy Mobilisation* cooperated with a Japanese star agency to develop a reality star-manufacturing segment, which foreshadowed its shift of focus from seeking ordinary people who could imitate celebrities to selecting grassroots stars with their own unique styles. Some of the previous *Joy Mobilisation* impersonation champions went on to participate in *Idol*-style contests such as *SVG* and became famous for their own talents.

24 Qi, ‘The Transmutation’, pp. 16-17, p. 35.

25 Ibid.
complete challenging tasks. Notable examples include the celebrity dance contest *Strictly Come Dancing* (*Wudong Qiji*; 2007, 2008, 2011), co-produced by Hunan TV (HTV) and the Hong Kong-based station TVB Jade, and the celebrity singing competition show *I Am a Singer* (*Woshi Geshou*; 2013–2016), which was adapted from the South Korean show of the same title (MBC, 2011–present) and broadcast by HTV. These shows usually focus on celebrity participants, who are not professional singers or dancers but are required to study and perform famous songs or dancing styles in a short period of time. The winners of the competitions are generally decided by votes from both a live-studio audience and a panel of professional judges.

According to a 2015 study by Bing Yu, this celebrity competition style has been well received by local audiences, because having stars fight for their fame through painful training, tough challenges and fierce competition reduces the psychological distance between celebrities and the public. Audiences of this reality TV genre are also encouraged to enjoy witnessing the ‘ordinary’, ‘authentic’ anxiety and sweat required to survive and succeed in the industry. Moreover, witnessing celebrities struggling and judging how well they have done not only ‘demystifies’ the celebrities’ on-screen fame, images and personas but also transforms some members of the studio audience into the object of ‘the look’. More interestingly, this role reversal whereby studio audience members are the object of the gaze of TV viewers

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26 The Chinese version of *Strictly Come Dancing* was known as the first officially adapted dance contest TV programme (with a legally purchased TV format from BBC) in Mainland China. It was originally broadcast weekly at 07:35 p.m., on Fridays. Later in 2014, the show was broadcast by Shanghai Dragon TV. For details, see ‘*Wudong Qiji*, Baidu Baike’<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%88%9E%E5%8A%A8%E5%A5%87%E8%BF%B9/7488>, accessed 16 December 2017.

27 The Chinese version was premiered on 18 January 2013 and broadcast every Friday at 10:00 p.m. Yet, in 2017, in response to copyright controversies, HTV reformatted the show and changed its title to *Singer (Geshou)*. For details, see ‘*Woshi Geshou*, Baidu Baike’<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%88%91%E6%98%AF%E6%AD%8C%E6%89%8B/3981757>, accessed 16 December 2017.


31 Here I refer to feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey’s ‘gaze theory’, in which she argues that classic Hollywood film diegesis often constructs a predominately heterosexual male gaze for the film spectator by framing on-screen female images of the ones to be ‘looked at’. See, Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen* 16:3 (1975), pp. 6-18.
at home or online can also be intentionally engineered by the shows’ producers.

For instance, as Chinese music studies scholars Qian Wang and Jeroen de Kloet’s find, ‘[w]hereas in the past talent shows like The Voice functioned as a possible stepping stone towards a music career, I am a singer operates on a different logic: the audience adjudicates if the singer is worthy of stardom’, 32 Nevertheless, it should be noted that I Am a Singer is notorious for its excessive use of close-up shots that highlight the emotional reactions of audience members, who are often shown crying or laughing when celebrities perform classic songs or are voted off the stage (fig. 4.4). 33 This televisual strategy of ‘looking-at’ audience members in the studio intensifies the tension and sense of drama generated by these celebrity competitions. This ‘emotionally charged’ audience participation has been criticised by both viewers and media commentators. 34 It has also been rumoured that some of the extremely emotional audience members in the studio are ‘professional viewers’ (zhiye guanzhong), hired by the show as a publicity gimmick to dramatise the competition. This manipulated on-screen images of studio audience members in the show can also be interpreted as part of the illusionary participatory feature of reality TV.

33 For details, see http://www.chinanews.com/yl/2013/04-02/4696693.shtml
34 Ibid.
In addition, although viewers at home can send comments directly to the programme directors during the shows’ live broadcasts (either online, as SMS, or via social media) critiquing the dramatic studio audience or encouraging the celebrities, these comments are screened and some are selected for airing as rolling subtitles on the top or bottom of the screen. To a certain degree, by this means, some viewers are able to (both inside and outside the studio) take on active roles as amateur judges and commentators for the competitions or as manipulative performers/participants who contribute to the sensationalism of the shows. This feature seems to exemplify what Jane Shattuc describes as ‘a seemingly “democratic” moment [in which] average people are given a similar treatment to the celebrity guests’ on TV.\textsuperscript{35} Nonetheless, the seemingly ‘participatory’ roles and pleasure of the audiences are, at the same time, manipulated and monitored by the shows’ producers and censors. These

celebrity reality programmes are thus critiqued for their often exaggerated, intentionally designed plots and scenes showing the pain and suffering experienced by the celebrities, as well as for the superficial ‘democratic’ space they offer.

As Yu’s research shows, since the first half of the 2010s, this celebrity competition style has evolved into an extreme reality TV style, known as ‘grilling celebrity’ (nuexing; making celebrities suffer)\(^{36}\) or ‘consuming celebrity’ (xiaofei mingxing; using celebrities’ personal lives, struggles and awkward performances as a selling point),\(^{37}\) whereby celebrities are invited to complete difficult or unusual tasks for audiences’ entertainment. For instance, on the reality show *Where Are We Going, Dad? (Baba, Quna’er?; HTV, China, 2013–present)* adapted from a South Korean format, male celebrities are asked to parent their own children alone in unfamiliar sociocultural environments. For the show *Survivor Games (Genzhe Bei’er Qu Maoxian; Shanghai Dragon TV, China, 2015)*, which was created according to the survivalist concept of the reality TV show *Running Wild with Bear Grylls* (NBC, USA, 2013–present), groups of singers and actors are asked to travel to harsh environments with the adventurer Edward Michael Grylls (also known as ‘Bear’ or ‘Bei Ye’ to the Chinese audience).\(^{38}\) In the diving competition show *Splash! (Zhongguo Xing Tiaoyue; Zhejiang Satellite TV, 2013)*, which was adapted from a Dutch format, celebrities were trained by professional divers for competing in world-famous gymnasiums.\(^{39}\)

Most of the ‘consuming-celebrity’ competitions are essentially on-screen tests of the stars’ abilities to enact certain gender and sexual roles in unfamiliar sociocultural settings. For example, in the show *Where Are We*


\(^{38}\) In 2017, the show *Survivor Games* was largely reformatted and retitled as *Absolute Wild (Yueye Quanli; Shanghai Dragon TV, China, 2017–present)*.

\(^{39}\) There was another celebrity diving contest show, *Stars in Danger: The High Dive (Xing Tiao Shuilifang; 2013)*, produced and broadcast by Jiangsu Satellite TV in the same broadcasting time slot. Yet, the show’s format was based on the programme *TV Total Turnspringen* (2004-2015) which was produced by the German company Banijay International. While there were some copyright lawsuits involving the two original formats, the two Chinese shows both accused the other one of copying its own programme idea.
Going, Dad?, a group of male celebrities with stable, happy marital-familial relationships are asked to live together and take care of their young children without help from their wives or any other female family members. While it seems that this task is aimed at teaching the male celebrities parenting skills that are essential in their heterosexual lives, the celebrities are also positioned in a same-sex, often homosocial, context to learn together and help each other to become good, caring, responsible fathers to their children. On the show, the celebrities often eventually display, or are expected to perform, a revised form of contemporary Chinese hegemonic male masculinity, such as acting tough and rational when facing challenges, constructing brotherhoods with each other, while also being considerate, responsible and gentle to their family members. This and other similar ways to queerly rework the gender and sexualised dimensions of the celebrity participants’ heterosexual marital-familial lives on reality TV becomes the ultimate appeal of celebrity-participation reality TV—a Chinese-specific form of queer gaze that hinges on the shows’ dual representations of both queer genders (such as male effeminacy) and homosociality and ‘real-life’ heterosexual identities and relationships. While it is not surprising to see queer star images and narratives on reality TV since the success of SVG in 2005, the glocal features of cross-gender performances in YFSF further complicated this queer gaze offered by Chinese celebrity-participation reality TV.

2.2. Fanchuan: becoming/unbecoming otherness
As aforementioned, the impersonation practices in YFSF appropriated local, inter-Asian and Western cross-gender cultures and practices. In particular, YFSF often employed a specific local Chinese term, fanchuan (literally meaning ‘reversing-crossing’) that has been used to describe cross-dressing narratives, characters and performances in the Chinese literary, theatrical and cinematic arts. Fanchuan can be practised by men (as female impersonation) or women (as male impersonation). Chinese-language film scholar See-Kam Tan points out that in traditional Chinese theatrical contexts, the ‘colloquial’
and ‘proper’ uses of the term *fanchuan* can be understood differently.⁴⁰ In particular, Tan argues that the proper usage of the term denotes performers who *occasionally* act in parts outside their specialization. This may entail acting across the gender line. … The performance may also require such actors to cross the age and class line. The ‘proper’ meaning of the term thus implies a multitude of possible ‘crossings’ along the gender, age and/or class continuums. As such it is not strictly gender-specific, as opposed to the colloquial sense of the term which specifically refers to performers who specialize in cross-gender roles, or who especially act in roles whose gender does not correspond with their biological one.⁴¹

To some extent, this broadened definition of *fanchuan* in its proper usage overlaps with my use of ‘cross-gender’ in this chapter, specifically for highlighting the crossings of *YFSF* impersonations along the intersected paradigms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class. Interestingly, the producers and hosts of *YFSF* often used *fanchuan* to describe the show’s gender-role-reversing performances. Moreover, another Chinese term *bianzhuang*, which literally means ‘transform sartorially’, was also used interchangeably with *fanchuan* in the show.⁴² Independently of the show, the colloquial use of *bianzhuang* can be seen in the Chinese translation of the English term, ‘drag queen’ (*bianzhuang huanghou*). Nevertheless, the linguistic employment of the two queer-connotated words in *YFSF* might be less about highlighting the (gender-) norm transgressiveness of the impersonations but more about positioning these performances as artistic, temporary moments on the stage. This can be further explained by film scholar Chia-Chi Wu’s findings in her 2010 study of Chinese-language cinemas. ⁴³ As C.C. Wu notes, the word *fanchuan* often designates professional role-playing acts rather than signs of the transvestite or homosexual identities of the performers in Chinese-speaking cultures. ⁴⁴

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⁴² Both terms were frequently used during conversations among the hosts, the judges and the participants on the show.


Similarly, as Wenjuan Xie’s research shows, the ‘proper’ use of bianzhuang in both pre-modern and modern Chinese sociocultural contexts can be seen in describing a general form of ‘attire-change’. The ambiguous, double meanings of both local terms widely used in the dialogue of YFSF partly divulge the show’s intention to present queer scenes while ‘dimming’ their norm-disruptive power in its televiusal space.

Moreover, the queer connotations of both fanchuan and bianzhuang were further shrugged off in YFSF for the reason that they often served as a bantering way to describe parodic impersonations (which often formed interventions into certain gender ideals) in which, for example, women with plain looks or masculine personas impersonated iconic women with normatively defined feminine beauty or hyperfeminine personas. In other words, fanchuan and bianzhuang were used in YFSF to establish another gendered hierarchy and/or to discursively validate hegemonic ideals of gender and sexualities, rather than to unveil or ridicule the constructedness of gender and sexuality. Ultimately, they helped to characterise the performances as on-screen, theatrical, unserious, occasional performing acts, instead of as a persistent gender-specific doing and becoming that might challenge the off-screen hegemonic culture.

Some research has been specifically dedicated to the norm-disruptive potential of female fanchuan performers in Chinese-language films and TV dramas. For example, historian Jin Jiang’s 2009 monograph, Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai, explores the gendered voice and power in the female cross-dressing performances of local Southern China’s operatic genre Yue in a patriarchal, chaotic Chinese time and space. Moreover, queer Sinophone scholar Alvin Ka Hin Wong’s 2012 study is an investigation of the transcultural adaptation of a famous Chinese tale set in the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279),

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Wong discusses how the feminine actress successfully plays the male protagonist of the story—a young literati who marries a snake-incarnated, beautiful woman with enormous magical power—in the tale’s contemporary TV adaptation in the early 1990s. Wong finds that in this fanchuan TV drama, the ‘nonexaggerating fanchuan female masculinity’ of the male protagonist, paired with the intentionally hyperfeminised (‘softer and mellower’) snake demon wife, ‘provide[s] a queer citationality of the beauty ideals of feminized masculinity in late imperial China’. Wong further argues that this queer coupling of a feminine actress’s fanchuan in an effeminate male role and another feminine actress in the role of a hyperfeminine female can be understood as a double challenge to the clear-cut, binarist gender stereotypes in local hegemonic expectations regarding both heterosexual (as masculine men and feminine women) and lesbian (as masculine butches and feminine femmes) relationships. Taking cues from these previous studies, I contextualise YFSF in contemporary Chinese women’s culture to unveil the queer and feminist, though often problematic and ‘re-normalised’, moments that emerged from the show’s cross-gender performances.

A growing body of literature has paid particular attention to the male fanchuan in pre-modern and modern Chinese-speaking societies. As Chinese masculinity studies scholar Kam Louie illustrates in his 2002 monograph Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China, the classic novels of the ‘scholar-beauty’ (caizi jiaren) genre of the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1912) often narrate romantic stories about talented, effeminate men and fine, literary women who are attracted by the scholars’ cultural attainment. As another Chinese studies scholar, Geng Song later explicates in his 2004 research, a trend of idealising the image of a ‘fragile scholar’ who has ‘rosy lips, sparkling white teeth, and jasper-like face’ as the

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49 Ibid, pp. 147-150.
50 Kam Louie, Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
perfect embodiment of ethnic-Han-Chinese manliness had already emerged during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368).\textsuperscript{51} Both Louie and Song believe that this fashioning of effeminate men in Chinese history showcased a cultural and political resistance (and, to some extent, also a highly racialised, if not explicitly racist, culture in Han-dominated China) during a turbulent time when ancient China was invaded and colonised by ethnic others who were stereotyped as uncultivated, violent and hypermasculine.\textsuperscript{52} This historical public acceptance and classic literary representation of effeminate men, though not necessarily involving explicit cross-dressing acts or gender-role reversal, demonstrates an interesting revision of hegemonic masculinity. This gendering of heterosexual maleness was intended to depict Han-Chinese manhood and national culture (epitomised in its delicate, cultured form of male masculinity) as superior to the assumed aggressive, barbarian non-Chinese invaders. In line with Louie’s and Song’s viewpoints, my analysis of YFSF cross-gender performances by two popular female celebrities in Section 5 interrogates a similar hierarchical gendering process that aimed to frame contemporary Chineseness as socioculturally proper, modernised, civilised and thus superior to non-Chinese others.

A number of studies have also been dedicated to feminist and queer analyses of the \textit{fanchuan} roles and performers in traditional and modern Chinese-language operas. For instance, Siu Leung Li’s 2003 monograph, \textit{Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera}, is a consideration of \textit{nandan} in Chinese operas ‘as agents in negotiating patriarchal containment and male ideological authority in performance’.\textsuperscript{53} In a more discursive manner, Helene Hok-Sze Leung’s critical reading of the transgender images in the well-known Chinese queer film \textit{Farewell My Concubine} (Chen Kaige, Beijing Film Studio, China, 1993) reveals that the film portrays the Peking opera \textit{nandan}, Cheng Dieyi, as a young man who went through ‘an abusive and involuntary inculcation of femininity’ during his opera training in his boyhood.\textsuperscript{54} Leung argues that, in

\textsuperscript{51} Geng Song, \textit{The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture} (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), p. 126.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid; and Louie, \textit{Theorising Chinese Masculinity}, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{53} Siu Leung Li, \textit{Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera} (Hong Kong: HKUP, 2003), p. 3.
the film, Cheng eventually ‘becomes the literal embodiment of the highest ideal’—‘a type of stylized womanhood’. Leung contends that the opera training of *fanchuan* performers—a special ‘trans’ form of a gender-normalising process, ‘brutal as it is, is shown in the film to have produced both a beautiful form of artistry and an admirable character with the courage to embrace becoming strange and becoming other’. In this way, the film narrates a ‘gendering’ discourse in which *fanchuan* performers ‘are being continually produced and reproduced by the normalizing regime, simply reform themselves over and over, sartorially and ideologically to fit into a norm that, in the end, always threatens to elude them’.

Leung’s discussion is useful to my analysis of *YFSF* regarding its process of transforming its celebrity impersonators. Yet, as I illustrate, what *YFSF* showcased was a flawed, queer televisual discourse in which the performers’ becoming and embracing of gendered, sexualised and ethnicised otherness were not only allowed but also encouraged because of their comedic presentations. In this way, the gender-parodic (both humorous and socioculturally transgressive) impersonations on the show were rendered imperfect, sometimes even failed, and thus less ‘authentic’ and less idealised. This *impossibility* of achieving an ideal impersonation of ‘otherness’ on the show, in fact, demonstrated the exclusive and discriminatory characteristics of the dominant gender/sex system of contemporary Chinese society. This ‘impossible’ feature of the show allowed its impersonators to simultaneously perform, ‘unbecome’, parody and negate sociocultural others. In this process, China’s gender-normalising regime and its related sociocultural hierarchies were sustained and promoted through these comedic cross-gender performances.

It is worthwhile to mention that in a 2012 study focusing on Taiwan, Chao-Jung Wu pays particular attention to contemporary Taiwanese Redtop Arts (*hongding yiren*)—a type of *fanchuan* theatrical show that was ‘established in 1994 in Taipei’ and shaped by a traditional Taiwanese cross-dressing

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56 Ibid, p. 196.
57 Ibid.
drama format, junior theatre (zidixi). C.J. Wu finds that, rather than a revised, modern form of junior theatre, the Redtop Arts ‘represented [a] middlebrow, commercialized entertainment genre’ and appropriated ‘drama, dance, and music materials … from cultures local and global, Eastern and Western, and traditional and contemporary’. Furthermore, as shown in C.J. Wu’s interviews with the Redtop Arts members, the performers’ ‘off-stage lives represent an embodied battleground between government authorities, mass media, and their own “real-life” struggles with gender ambiguity and homosexual experience’. C.J. Wu believes that the ‘sociocultural, physical, and psychological dimensions of fanchuan artists’ transgender performance not only reveal the fluidity of gender identity, but also exemplify an embodied process of gender construction and performativity in contemporary Taiwanese culture.

Although my analysis does not involve ethnography, this borrowing and mixing of transcultural elements in the reconfiguration of traditional queer-loaded performances in order to negotiate with real-life gender and sexual ideals is particularly relevant to my reading of YFSF. I examine the star images and public personas of the celebrity performers, and thus explore whether and to what extent their gendered public images and impressions offstage helped to legitimise, if not normalise, their cross-gender performances on the show. As I further illustrate in my later analysis, it was the celebrity impersonators’ personal profiles, backstage preparations and off-show real life combined that simultaneously deconstructed and re-normalised the Chinese-specific intersected ideals of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class on the stage of a supposedly queer-intense show. The performers and the show were able to intentionally ‘fail’ the performances in

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60 Ibid.
61 Ibid, p. 227. The ‘sociocultural, physical, and psychological dimensions’ discussed by C.J. Wu include ‘the performers’ personal profile (including their physical attributes, sexuality, cultural and social backgrounds), backstage preparation (which involved the denationalization of the body and the construction of a dream woman), and offstage life (which revealed their gender identity and confrontation of heteronormativity)’. See, ibid., p. 277.
comedic ways, and thus, to distance themselves from stigmatised gender and sexual minority identity labels. A similar normalising of queer terms, arts, acts and cultures on the show can also be found in YFSF’s appropriation of East Asian and Western cross-gender practices, which is discussed in the following section.

2.3. Queering the global drag/gaze?
Some Asian impersonation-related subcultural practices that emphasise gender-role reversal have been popularised in Mainland China since 2000. Similar to fancuan, these inter-Asian circulated subcultures have significantly influenced the development of cross-gender impersonation in today’s China. One notable example is the prevalent male androgyny trend in K-pop, which has shaped and been appropriated in the local legitimisation of androgynous stars in contemporary Chinese-speaking societies (for a detailed discussion of this point, see Chapter Three). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the androgynous beauty of male K-pop stars does not necessarily indicate male homosexuality. K-pop scholar Sun Jung, for instance, remarks that the ‘soft masculinity’ of male K-pop stars is well received in Asia due to its expression of a kind of ‘pseudo-gayness’, whereby the gendered discourse ultimately works to emphasise that the male stars ‘are pretty but not actually gay’. Moreover, as revealed in Chuyun Oh and David D. Oh’s research on K-pop cross-dressing, the K-pop male stars’ gendered personas can be traced back to the cross-dressing traditions of the local Korean performing arts, which rendered it a form of theatricality. In this sense, the androgynous male stardom in contemporary K-pop becomes an ‘entertaining play for mainstream audiences […], which is also known as “fan service”’.64

A similar logic is evident in cosplay. Emerging as a fan practice in 1980s’ Japan, cosplay has now become a global cultural activity whereby ‘fan

performers wear costumes to impersonate media characters or celebrities’.  

Some researchers find that contemporary cosplay as a fictional role-playing game crafts a playground ‘fraught with the negotiations and representations of power and gender’,  

which ‘entails cross-dressing’ and ‘multilayered heterosexual and homosexual tensions’.

However, as revealed by Shih-chen Chao’s research on the Chinese fans’ appropriation of Japanese feminine culture in their cross-dressing, given the homophobic tendencies of mainstream public spaces in East Asia, the performers in cross-cultural cosplay often need to carefully negotiate the queer dimension of their performances with local and inter-Asian normative gender and sexual cultures.  

*YFSF* not only appropriated the forms of these East Asian cross-dressing practices, but also adapted their negotiative, sometimes compromising, gestures to legitimise its gender parody.

For instance, as I detail later, most of the impersonators in *YFSF* emphasised their ‘normal’ gender and sexual identities in various ways, either right after their cross-gender performances or during their other public appearances. Sometimes the celebrity participants also deliberately highlighted the flaws of their cross-gender performances in a self-mocking manner in order to show the audience their ‘inability’ to transgress the gendered, classed and ethnicised boundaries. This can be seen as a slightly revised, subtle form of fan service that aims to queerly tantalise the audience without queering the celebrities’ gender and sexual identities. A more complicated, interesting case

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For detailed discussions on cross-play, see Shih-chen Chao, “Cosplay, Cuteness, and *Weiniang*: The Queered *Ke’ai* of Male Cosplayer as “Fake Girls””, in Maud Lavin, Ling Yang and Jing Jamie Zhao (eds.), *Boys’ Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan* (Hong Kong: HKUP, 2017), pp. 20-44.

68 See Chao, ‘Cosplay, Cuteness, and *Weiniang*’, pp. 20-44.
that is worth elaboration here is the fleeting popularity and sudden disappearance of Chinese male celebrity Zhu Zixiao from the show.

Although *YFSF* was filled with cross-gender, hyperbolic impersonations, Zhu, who frequently participated in the show’s impersonation competition before 2013, had rarely performed any female impersonation. Instead, he was applauded for his impersonation of a number of good-looking male celebrities (fig. 4.5). This move along the male gender continuum (by impersonating different forms of male masculinity) might be a less queered practice than cross-dressing in female roles. Nevertheless, Zhu was famous for his ‘flower-like’ beautiful boy look, which won him the chance to play one of the male protagonists in the TV drama *Let’s Watch the Meteor Shower* (*Yiqi Qukan Liuxing Yu*, HTV, China, 2009)—the Mainland Chinese TV adaptation of the Japanese comic series *Boys Over Flowers* written by Yoko Kamio (1992-2008). Meanwhile, many of the male icons Zhu selected to impersonate on *YFSF* were either rumoured to be gay in Chinese public culture, such as Leehom Wang and Fei Xiang, or foreign male stars famous for their nonnormatively gendered personas, such as Elvis Presley, whose appropriation of diverse music styles and nonnormative performances of male genders and sexualities in his staged personas made him a popular icon in Western drag king culture. Zhu was so successful and popular for his impersonations in the show that he was even referred to as a ‘resident guest’ (*changzhu jiabin*) of the show and sometimes helped co-host it. Yet, in later seasons of the show, Zhu disappeared without any official announcement. This happened after a gay scandal about him and the well-known young male Chinese novelist and film director Guo Jingming started drawing wide

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69 There were several other popular Asian TV adaptations of the comic, such as the Taiwanese hit, *Meteor Garden* (*Liuxing Huayuan*, CTS, TW, 2001) and the South Korean version, *Boys Over Flowers* (KBS2, South Korean, 2009).

70 See, Shuyan Zhou, ‘From Online BL Fandom to the CCTV Spring Festival Gala: The Transforming Power of Online Carnival’, in Maud Lavin, Ling Yang and Jing Jamie Zhao (eds.), *Boys’ Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan* (Hong Kong: HKUP, 2017), pp. 91-110.

It was rumoured that Zhu was blacklisted and censored by the Chinese entertainment industry because of his potential gay identity. This sudden canning of Zhu from the show can be seen as a good example of celebrity impersonators who carefully manage their on-screen queer personas yet are unable to strategically ‘normalise’ their off-screen gender and sexual identities.

Figure 4.5: A screen capture of Zhu impersonating Elvis Presley in YFSF.

Besides these inter-Asian cultural influences, it is also hard to ignore the cultural impact of Western drag culture, especially through televised shows, in contemporary China. In his most recent study on Shanghai drag culture, Chinese queer scholar Hongwei Bao notes that, thanks to the Chinese audience’s easy online access to the American drag competition show RuPaul’s Drag Race (VH1, USA, 2009–present) via some live-streaming video websites, the Western drag ball culture might have been further appropriated in the cosmopolitan, commercial drag scenes in Mainland China in recent years.

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72 The scandal was already circulated online as early as in 2010. Yet, around 2011 and 2012, Zhu gained a wider popularity and was very active in Chinese film and TV industries. The scandal thus drew more attention. For details on Zhu’s gay scandal, see http://www.twoeggz.com/news/3442537.html
73 See, http://news.ifeng.com/a/20170824/51743445_0.shtml
The emergence and existence of drag in the West certainly precedes the airing of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Notably, modern forms of drag have been believed to be a performance mainly ‘involving men dressing up as women’, which originated in 18th-century Britain and became popular in North America and European countries during the 19th century. In Western public recognition and scholarly discussions, drag culture has been historically associated with the gay male culture and gay rights movements in the West, such as the Stonewall Riots in 1960s New York, and has been highly appreciated in Western (semi-) public gay spaces, such as gay bars.

An influential queer reading of Western drag images is presented by Butler in her book chapter ‘Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion’. Butler focuses on *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, Academy Entertainment/Off White Productions, USA, 1991), a documentary film about the drag ball scene in New York City. Rather than simply arguing that drag is inherently subversive, she remarks that ‘drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is

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77 George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); and Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 3. A number of Western queer and feminist scholars have debated the social-political implications of drag culture and its media representations. For instance, following Esther Newton’s understanding of drag in her seminal work *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, American queer and transgender scholar Judith Halberstam emphasises in her monograph *Female Masculinity* that drag ‘describes discontinuities between gender and sex or appearance and reality but refuses to allow this discontinuity to represent dysfunction. In a drag performance, rather, incongruence becomes the site of gender creativity’. However, Halberstam criticises Newton for her simplification of drag as ‘primarily related to gay male culture’. Halberstam points out that while the drag queen (female impersonators) culture has been active and has been given a lot of media and scholarly attention in the U.S., drag kings (male impersonators) have also ‘been an important part of social negotiation over the meaning of gender’ in American public and pop cultural domains. See, Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, pp. 236, 231.

78 The chapter was included in Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality’. 79 Countering some American feminist scholars’ (e.g., bell hooks’s) views of gay male drag as misogynistic practices that imitate and thus ridicule female femininity, 80 Butler contends that this critique of drag itself reproduces a heteronormative logic, in terms of which

drag is nothing but the displacement and appropriation of ‘women’, and hence fundamentally based in a misogyny, a hatred of women; and [in a similar way, you can argue that] lesbianism is nothing but the displacement and appropriation of men, and so fundamentally a matter of hating men——misandry. 81

Furthermore, in her book Gender Trouble, Butler also deals with the parodic nature of drag and its relationship with misogyny. 82 As Butler points out, through drag performances,

parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalised or essentialist gender identities. Although the gendered meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nonetheless denaturalised and mobilised through their parodic recontextualisation. 83

Butler’s interpretations of the ways in which drag, as a productive form of gender parody, can cite and reinforce some hegemonic cultures, yet simultaneously showcase the heterosexual culture itself as imitative and unnatural, is particularly intriguing here. A shared playful, hyperbolic nature can also be found in the Shanghai commercial (yet ‘semi-underground’) 84 drag scene discussed by Bao.

Bao’s study reveals that the playfulness of drag might be a performative process itself, partly stipulated by mainstream culture and partly formed

79 Butler, Bodies, p. 125.
81 Ibid, p. 127.
82 Butler, Gender Trouble.
83 Ibid, p. 188.
84 Bao, “‘Shanghai Is Burning’”, p. 235.
through the performers’ subjective choices. In his discussion of some
performers’ hyperbolic, humorous presentations of gendered bodily features,
Bao elaborates:

Drag performers must ‘perform’ gender in an exaggerated manner, so
that the traces of imitation can be detected easily by the audience. If
such a performance or ‘imitation’ appears too realistic, the society
then feels obliged to police such a ‘performance’ to make it appear
‘unreal’. Drag performers constantly must negotiate with the notion
of authenticity in relation to gender. In making such negotiations, they
reveal the fictional and arbitrary nature of gender norms and open up
imaginings for the resignification of gender. The example of drag,
therefore, becomes a good illustration for the social construction of
gender through performativity of gendered embodiments.85

As my analysis in the rest of the chapter shows, YFSF’s hyperbolic cross-
gender impersonations cannot be simply seen as a local Asian manifestation
of the promise and problems of Western drag. Nevertheless, in line with
Bao’s view, I consider the comedic effect of YFSF performances as
performative, negotiative strategies within mainstream public spaces.
Furthermore, my analysis of the show’s sequences reveals that the strategies
can also be practiced through the show’s manipulation of televisual-cultural
techniques, which are ultimately aimed at ‘performing’ China’s class-based,
ethnically defined gender and sexual ideals on the show.

Here, the scholarly debate surrounding the intertwined queer and normative
characteristics of the drag representations in RuPaul’s Drag Race is
particularly relevant. In their 2014 study, Sabrina Strings and Long T. Bui
criticise RuPaul’s Drag Race for its ‘policing of racial identity for certain
minority characters’ and its portrayal of those characters ‘as fundamentally
“Other”…, re-instating race as “natural” or “real”’.86 From a different angle,
David Gudelunas’s 2016 research sees the exaggerated drag performances in
RuPaul’s Drag Race as televised queer manifestations of culture jamming,87
that is, a way of ‘re-routing spectacular images, environments, ambiances and

85 Ibid, p. 244.
86 Strings and Bui, ‘She Is Not Acting’, p. 823.
87 David Gudelunas, ‘Culture Jamming (and Tucking): RuPaul’s Drag Race and
Unconventional Reality’, Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture 1:2 (2016), pp. 231-
249.
events to reverse or subvert their meaning, thus reclaiming them’. 88 Gudelunas argues that the queer convergence of reality TV and culture jamming on the show can be seen as mocking both the ‘authentic’ and ‘capitalist’ logics of the highly commercialised and gendered reality TV genre. 89

I have no interest in contending that the cross-dressing impersonations in *YFSF* had the same political and ideological force attributed to *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in Gudelunas’s study. However, the gendered and cultural ironies of *YFSF*’s impersonations certainly complicated the show’s potential to reify the official culture’s imaginaries of gender, sexuality and other sociocultural identities. In particular, I inspect the ways in which *YFSF* merged and reconfigured diverse gender-parodying traditions, televisual aesthetics and pop cultures that are queer in tone through a form of *egao*——a Chinese-specific ‘spoofing culture [that] uses irony and satire to mock power holders, as well as government policies and practices’. 90 By doing so, I demonstrate that the show simultaneously defied and reinforced gender-related norms and sociocultural binaries, with particular respect to a gender-normative, modernised China versus a deviant, less-civilised Other.

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89 Gudelunas, ‘Culture Jamming (and Tucking)’, pp. 231-249.
It is worthwhile to note that Bao’s research reveals a different picture of the Chinese appropriation of Western drag. He notes that from a Western-centric point of view, people might assume that a ‘global drag’ identity emerged in Shanghai. Bao argues that this assumption replicates the fallacious conceptualisation of ‘global gay’ identity proposed by Dennis Altman. As Bao argues, in its most simplistic, hegemonic form, [t]he ‘global drag’ is often found at commercial venues frequented by an international clientele. Their practitioners and consumers are usually young, urban and English-speaking Chinese nationals and foreign expatriates. The ‘global drag’ identity sometimes threatens to replace, marginalise and overshadow homegrown or indigenous forms of queer identities, including cross-dressing performers on Chinese theatrical stages and the low-income transgender sex workers who wander around Shanghai’s city streets and cheap nightclubs.

Yet, Bao observes that the Shanghai drag performers take inspirations from the Western drag culture, appropriat[e] the style, us[e] cheap goods from online shops and invented their queer pleasure. They are essentially ‘queering’ the ‘global drag’ identity originating from the West and dominated by consumer capitalism by giving drag different meanings.

Moreover, Bao points out that the Shanghai drag performers achieve this queering of the global drag culture by ‘revers[ing] the objectifying and orientalising [global or Western] gaze’ that frames Chinese queer culture ‘as a “national allegory” in “Third World” texts’. Meanwhile, he argues that the ‘playfulness, fun and pleasure’ shown in the Shanghai drag theatre’s backstage also discursively challenges ‘the early representations of queer people as “lonely” and “sad” young men who have no homes or families to belong to in East Asian queer cinema’.

I do not disagree with Bao’s understandings of the queer potential of the Shanghai drag scene to challenge both the victimisation and negativisation

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91 Bao, “‘Shanghai Is Burning’”, pp. 237-238.
93 Bao, “‘Shanghai Is Burning’”, p. 238.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid, p. 239.
(associated with no future, infertility, unhappiness and failure)\textsuperscript{97} of local queer culture in both hegemonic Western imaginations and previous East Asian media representations. Nonetheless, my analysis of \textit{YFSF}, a mainstream TV show that needed to be passed by the local media censorship system and survive in the predominantly normative, authoritarian space of the local media industry, uncovers a more intricate case. In this case, the ‘global drag’, or the global TV culture in general, was further queered to create a new, ethnic-China-centric ‘global gaze’ with enormous normalising and objectifying power.

3. Queering the impersonations in \textit{YFSF}

After only a month of preparation and promotion, \textit{YFSF} premiered on 12 July 2012 on HTV.\textsuperscript{98} This entertainment programme, which aired weekly at 10 p.m. on Thursdays, was launched with the aim of saving HTV after the disappointing ratings the channel had received for the first half of 2012.\textsuperscript{99} In order to compete with other forms of variety TV shows, such as reality dating and talent shows aired by other provincial stations during the same broadcasting slot, HTV promoted \textit{YFSF} as the first celebrity impersonation show in Mainland China. The producers collaborated with online video streaming platforms, such as tv.sohu.com, to air clips of the show.\textsuperscript{100} In addition, an interactive online platform was set up on the \textit{YFSF} Weibo page (the Chinese version of Twitter),\textsuperscript{101} which allowed viewers to propose and vote for the names of celebrities they wanted to see on the show (fig. 4.6).

\textsuperscript{97} For a discussion on the heteronormative world’s association of negativity with queerness, see Jack Halberstam, \textit{The Queer Art of Failure} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
\textsuperscript{98} Wei Chen, ‘\textit{YFSF}: Variaty Shows’ New Trend’, \textit{Journal of Hunan Mass Media Vocational Technical College} 13:1 (2013), p. 34. The author of this academic journal paper was self-identified as one of the directors of \textit{YFSF}.
\textsuperscript{99} See ibid, p. 34. It was said that the rating of HTV’s entertainment programmes dropped out of the top ten list for the highest-rated variety shows nationwide in the same broadcasting time slot in the first half of 2012.
\textsuperscript{100} The page for \textit{YFSF} is available here: http://tv.sohu.com/bbdkjx/. Later, the show became accessible via other popular Chinese video-streaming sites, such as iQiyi.com and Youku.com.
\textsuperscript{101} The show’s Weibo page is available here: https://www.weibo.com/baibiandaka?is_all=1
Figure 4.6: A screen capture of the YFSF Weibo page from January 2019. The page showed that the site had 1,116,432 followers. The last post on the site was a Chinese New Year greeting from the YFSF production team from 27 January 2017. The comic image posted on the site shows the host He Jiong cosplaying the media character Thor, which exemplifies one of the interethnic impersonations of YFSF.\textsuperscript{102}

In order to distinguish the show’s impersonation theme and practices from concepts with negative connotations, such as ‘copycats’ (fangmao; maochong) and ‘plagiarism’ (chaoxi), the first episode of season one began with a prologue pre-recorded by the hosts:

> Everyone’s growing-up journey is a route with impersonation as its starting point: the first time we talk, we impersonate the voices of our parents; the first time we dance and sing, we impersonate the stars. Established masters who have won success and fame began their journey by impersonating others. They eventually shone brightly for their own uniqueness when they left the impersonation stage behind. Therefore, let us celebrate impersonation.... Impersonation aims ultimately to surpass.\textsuperscript{103}

These opening remarks framed impersonation positively, not merely as copying others, but as a sociocultural practice and a learned skill that is indispensable for growth and success. Thus, the first season of YFSF promoted itself as a programme presenting professional, mostly non-satirical impersonations that paid tribute to iconic figures and performances. Following the concept of the original Spanish show, its first season

\textsuperscript{102} The words in Chinese on the Thor-cosplaying image mean ‘You know the season six of YFSF is forthcoming by looking at my facial expressions’. Nevertheless, the new season was later cancelled and never revived.

\textsuperscript{103} The opening prologue was originally in Mandarin Chinese. This translation is my own.
emphasised the impersonation skills and performance quality of the celebrity participants. Interestingly, the ways in which the show framed impersonation followed a similar logic to that discussed by Butler in her conceptualisation of gender performativity and parody:

\[
\text{[G]ay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of 'the original'…reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original.}^{105}
\]

The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or, indeed to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.^{106}

Although in the first season most of the celebrities impersonated stars of the same gender, the focus on the ubiquity of impersonation practices in people’s daily lives and the potential of impersonation to denaturalise the (often gendered) norms of bodily acts also paved the way for the cross-gender performances that flourished in later seasons of the show.

The first season of *YFSF* consisted of eleven episodes. For each episode, six celebrity participants were invited to perform impersonations and three celebrity judges commented on and evaluated the performances from their respective professional perspectives. A number of professional star impersonators (performers who impersonated stars as a career but were not celebrities themselves) were also invited to sit among the live studio audience and sometimes to perform onstage to highlight the blurred boundaries between the audience and the celebrities on the show. These impersonators were collectively known as ‘the impersonation king show group’ (*mowang xiutuan*). They were asked to rate the celebrity participants’ performances at certain crucial moments of the competition.^{107} In each episode, the celebrity participant who received the highest score was selected to compete in the show’s monthly and annual impersonation competitions.

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106 Ibid.
107 In the following seasons, the voting of this impersonation king show group was gradually replaced by the voting of selected viewers out of the live studio.
In order to cater for the tastes of the show’s target audience, who, given the broadcasting time, were mostly students and young, low- and middle-class office workers, YFSF also incorporated spoofs and culture jamming elements, not only within the performances but also in its hosting, competition and televisual styles.\textsuperscript{108} For example, during each episode one or two guest celebrity performers, who were not involved in the competition, were invited to perform comedic impersonations, some of which involved cross-dressing (fig. 4.7). The hosts and judges often commented on these hyperbolic performances in an obvious ‘comedic roast’ (\textit{tucao}) style.\textsuperscript{109}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4.7.jpg}
\caption{A screen capture of the Hong Kong male actor Wong Cho Lam, the show’s impersonation coach, who was invited to impersonate the famous Taiwanese female singer Chang Hui-mei in the first season.\textsuperscript{110} During his parodic singing performance, Wong mocked himself for being the same height as Chang, who is also petite in stature.}
\end{figure}

This culture jamming element was also manifest in the show’s use of ‘time lift’ (\textit{shiguang dianti}). This unique feature allowed the celebrities to ‘transition’ and ‘appear’ in front of the audience as the stars they impersonated.\textsuperscript{111} Before each impersonation performance, a short clip showed the week-long training process undergone by the celebrities, during

\textsuperscript{109} Notably, the term, ‘comedic roast’, was an imported word from the West. In 2010s, its translation, \textit{tucao}, has gradually become a popular Chinese slang. There is a well-received, online comedic talk show programme in China, \textit{Roast! (Tucao Dahui)}; QQ, China, 2017-present), the format of which was adapted from the American TV show, \textit{Comedy Central Roast} (Comedy Central, USA, 2003-present).
\textsuperscript{110} The performance was included in the episode aired on 06 September 2012.
\textsuperscript{111} Chen, ‘YFSF’, p. 35.
which they were mentored by professional singing and performing coaches. This was followed by a brief interview with the celebrity participant looking tired and frustrated and speaking of the difficulties encountered during the training. These interviews were conducted by the host in a small backstage room containing a ‘time lift’, which the celebrities entered right after the interviews. As shown in Figure 4.8, in the next shot, one celebrity emerged and walked out of the lift to the centre of the stage in full costume and makeup to begin the impersonation performance.

![Figure 4.8: the female celebrity participant, Jia Ling, mounting the stage from the ‘time lift’. Lit from the back and side, her face was obscured while her body shape, costume and hairstyle was emphasised, creating a mysterious and spectacular mise en scène.](image)

Although it was promoted as a reality TV show, *YFSF* often incorporated a number of pre-recorded and pre-edited semi-documentary-style segments interspersed with live performances. Throughout both the training and stage performance sections of the show, awkward moments and mistakes made by the celebrities were deliberately retained. The stage lighting was cleverly designed to create a haze around the performers as they walked out of the lift, blurring their faces and drawing attention to their body shapes, costumes and postures. As well as emphasising the theatrical and fantastical elements of the show, these lighting and editing techniques also emphasised the comedic aspects of the performances. This was especially the case when lighting from various angles illuminated the faces of the performers, making the audience suddenly aware that the celebrity participants were impersonating the stars in
comedic ways (fig. 4.9). The sharp contrast between the dreamy (and sometimes hyperbolic) performances and the out-takes showing the training and the mistakes underlined the theatricality of the performances. These techniques established a performative space for the gender-parodic impersonations that would dominate the show’s subsequent seasons.

Figure 4.9: A screen capture of Jia Ling parodying the late American actress Marilyn Monroe in the show’s first season.\textsuperscript{112} The comic effect of the scene was heightened by careful manipulation of the stage lighting.

As Yating Han’s research on \textit{YFSF} reveals, the show’s televisual manipulations and its spoofing feature combined to contribute to the impressively high rating received for its first season.\textsuperscript{113} Judging from the audience votes on the performances, cross-dressing impersonations were the most well-received acts, even though only a few of these performances were aired in the first season.\textsuperscript{114} A case in point was the female celebrity Qu Ying’s cross-dressing impersonation of the Chinese male singer Mao Ning, which was broadcast in the season’s final episode and won that season’s championship.\textsuperscript{115} Furthermore, over the course of its first season, the show’s focus gradually shifted from emphasising the similarity between the performers and the stars they impersonated (a form of successful,

\textsuperscript{112} The performance was included in the episode broadcast on 30 August 2012.
\textsuperscript{113} Han, ‘A Brief Analysis’, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{114} See the ranking and final score (decided by the audience’s and celebrity judge’s votes) of the show’s performances and celebrity participants at: \url{https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%99%BE%E5%8F%98%E5%A4%A7%E5%92%96%E7%A7%80%E7%AC%AC%E4%B8%80%E5%AD%A3/17280813}
\textsuperscript{115} The episode was broadcast on 20 September 2012.
professional impersonations) to the comedic effects produced by the often exaggerated cross-dressing performances (as a form of failed but humorous impersonations). As I illustrate later, in response to the enormous popularity of the ‘failed’ impersonations, YFSF has, since its second season, adapted its televiusal style to ‘re-normalise’ the performances of its celebrity participants. In the first episode of the second season, three of the show’s six performances by celebrity participants were female-to-male cross-dressing impersonations, and gender-role-reversing impersonations counted for more than half of the performances in many episodes across subsequent seasons.

It should be noted that in its later seasons, YFSF’s ‘failed’, comedic male-to-female cross-dressing impersonations were often a form of spectacular ‘camp’ performances (tinted with gender-parodic humour related to gay culture)\(^\text{116}\) featuring male celebrities dressed ‘as women in a fashion that does not necessarily attempt to approximate real biological females, but rather an exaggerated version of them’.\(^\text{117}\) According to Gudelunas’s study, this kind of camp performances have also been popular in the RuPaul’s Drag Race.\(^\text{118}\) For instance, as shown in figure 4.10, one of the most popular male celebrity participants of YFSF, Da Zhang Wei impersonated the famous Taiwanese female singer, Tsai Chin on the show in a hyperbolic, comedic style. According to Shzr Ee Tan’s research, Tsai has been a famous gay icon in Taiwan and her songs and success are considered a form of ‘musical and economic empowerment’ for Chinese-speaking gay men.\(^\text{119}\) Although Da Zhang Wei is a successful, professional singer in Mainland China, his impersonation of Tsai emphasised and exaggerated the hyperfeminine gestures and look of Tsai, instead of focusing on imitating Tsai’s singing.


\(^{117}\) Gudelunas, ‘Culture Jamming’, p. 236.

\(^{118}\) Ibid., pp. 231-249.

Moreover, the show also adopted a queer strategy similar to that deployed in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* whereby the reality TV genre was parodied by mixing and reproducing televisual languages recognisable from a series of influential Chinese reality TV shows. Over time, this produced, what Gudelunas called, ‘a bricolage of signature moments from reality competitions across the television landscape’. One example of this parodic borrowing from other Chinese programmes can be seen in a special segment of *YFSF* entitled ‘I Am a Singer Too’ (*Wo Yeshi Geshou*). This segment, which featured in an episode of the show’s final season, required celebrities to impersonate the participants in another celebrity competition show *I Am a Singer*, who were, in turn, invited to the *YFSF* studio to watch the show live (fig. 4.11). The camera often zoomed in on the emotional reactions of the *I Am a Singer* stars watching the *YFSF* impersonations of themselves, which parodied *I am a Singer*’s overuse of close-up shots of the live studio audience. Interestingly, this televisual pastiche proved effective as an ‘inter-programme’ promotion strategy for *YFSF*, especially since the period for promoting the show prior to its first airing was limited. By inviting celebrity participants from other reality TV programmes broadcast by HTV to take part in *YFSF* and by having participants impersonate sensational performances from other variety shows,

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120 The performance was included in the episode aired on 20 September 2012.
122 This episode was broadcast on 3 April 2014.
the channel ensured that all the shows and celebrities involved received more media exposure and greater audience attention.\textsuperscript{123}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4.11.png}
\caption{A picture collage comparing the Hong Kong male actor Wong Cho Lam (left) impersonating the Hong Kong female singer Tang Tse-kei’s performance in the show \textit{I Am a Singer} (right).\textsuperscript{124} Tang was invited to the studio of \textit{YFSF} to observe Wong’s cross-dressing impersonation of herself.}
\end{figure}

Over the course of the show’s five seasons, an increasing number of guests and participants, as well as the hosts themselves, wore cosplay and special effects makeup and impersonated the roles of fictional characters. For instance, as shown in figure 4.12, in one episode of its fifth season, the show’s two hosts cosplaying the fictional characters Thor and Sleeping Beauty. Although their impersonations did not involve cross-dressing performances, the male host who cosplayed Thor wore a blonde, long curly wig. He repeatedly joked on the show that he felt he was ‘de-masculinised’ (\textit{niang}) by the wig.

\textsuperscript{123} Han, ‘A Brief Analysis’, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{124} The picture was retrieved from http://weifang.dzwww.com/yil/201402/t20140216_9657504.htm
In addition, *YFSF* began to feature more cross-dressing, hyperbolic re-enactments of classic theatre, significant events in the entertainment industry, and well-known performances from film and TV shows. For instance, figure 4.13 shows a performance featured two young male actors Sun Jian and Hu Hu impersonating two famous Chinese actresses battling with each other for the best actress award in an award ceremony. The presenter in the middle was played by the Taiwanese male comedian Chieh-Hui Hsu who was dressed as the famous character Lord Duan from the Hong Kong comedy film *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* (Jeffrey Lau, Block 2 Pictures/Scholar Films, Hong Kong, 1993). This partially fictional scene mixed rumours surrounding the two actresses with sequences of humourous narratives drawn from the film. As shown in figure 4.14, Sun Jian and Hu Hu paired together again in another performance on the show to re-enact the classic scene from the American film *Titanic* (James Cameron, 20th Century Fox/Paramount Pictures, 1997). During the performance, they not only impersonated the heterosexual couple (Jack and Rose) in the film but also spoke Chinese dialects instead of English. The pair’s awkward dialogue and intentionally exaggerated pretentious gestures created comedic effect. In these two and many other re-enacted scenes on the show, the original images and texts were replaced by, or mixed with, elements of local Chinese cultures, such as provincial dialects or regional art forms. Audio-visual materials from different sociocultural
contexts were also used to highlight the spoofing style of the cross-gender performances.

Figure 4.13: A screen capture of one of the cross-dressing performances on *YFSF*, in which two male celebrities impersonating two high-profile Chinese actresses who competed with each other for a media award.

Along with the numerous changes to its impersonation styles and televisual formats, *YFSF*’s editing and post-production techniques were also altered over the course of the show’s five seasons. In the first season, the impersonation scenes generally used the picture-in-picture (*huazhonghua*; PiP hereafter) technique, which entails superimposing a small frame at the bottom corner of the screen displaying the original image or video (fig. 4.15).

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125 The performance is in the episode broadcast on 27 June 2013.
This technique facilitated comparison of the two performances and highlighted their similarity. In later seasons, multiple frames were created, using split-screen, solarisation, wiping or montage effects to emphasise contrasts between the original images and the comedic impersonations (fig. 4.16). The show’s final season incorporated many digital special effects, such as chroma keying, which enabled performers to be ‘cut out’ of the original shot and replaced by humorous or satirical Chinese characters (fig. 4.17). As Miao Tang and Qi Luo’s research shows, these special effects undermined the realism of the performances and foregrounded the comic, exaggerated impersonation as the show’s signature.\textsuperscript{127} In addition, certain unique aspects of the show, such as training processes, backstage interviews and the use of time lift, were either removed or changed to short videos of humorous monologues and sketches.

Figure 4.15: A screen capture showing the PiP technique used during one of the show’s impersonation performance.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
As discussed above, Bao’s study of Shanghai’s drag culture shows that drag performers must carefully negotiate the ‘authentic’ dimension of their public gendered performances in order to evade mainstream society’s gender policing. Moreover, Gudelunas’s research demonstrates that RuPaul’s Drag Race differs from earlier reality TV shows, which ‘take real individuals and submit them to surveillance, analysis and selective display as a means to

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128 Bao, ‘Shanghai Is Burning’, p. 244.
entertainment and enhanced audience participation’. Instead, Gudelunas believes that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* allows drag performers to ‘represent a unique twist in the reality television universe where artificiality is celebrated and becomes the very point of the programme’. By this means, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* also ‘makes claims to authenticity by not being original at all’ and by ‘announcing [its] artificiality’. In a similar way, the adjustments to *YFSF*’s cultural-visual elements made the show’s cross-gender impersonations less ‘realistic’ and more ‘playful’ and ‘artificial’. Thus, *YFSF* carves out a carnivalesque, theatrical space in which gender-parodic impersonations can negotiate with gender-related ideals and sociocultural hierarchies in the real world. Nevertheless, as my analysis of the cross-gender impersonation sequences performed by two of the popular female celebrities from *YFSF* in the following sections illustrates, this challenge to the authenticity (as well as the ‘originality’ and ‘naturalness’) of gender norms on the show was ultimately achieved through the recasting of other ethnicised and class-based sociocultural ideals in a Chinese-specific postfeminist framework.

4. Re-normalising the modern Chinese Woman on *YFSF*

4.1. Imagining Chinese womanhood in a postfeminist age

Throughout *YFSF*’s five seasons, two female Chinese celebrities Qu Ying and Jia Ling (fig. 4.18) performed many popular and sensational cross-gender impersonations on the show. As mentioned above, Qu’s accomplished cross-dressing impersonations were generally well-received by *YFSF*’s judges and viewers, and Jia’s parodies also became highlights of the show due to their comedic, carnivalesque features. In early 2013, together with three male Chinese celebrities who often performed satirical acts on *YFSF*, they formed a celebrity impersonation group known as ‘Five *YFSF* Impersonation Masters’.

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130 Gudelunas, ‘Culture Jamming’, p. 236;
131 Ibid.
132 Bao, ‘Shanghai Is Burning’, p. 244
133 Ibid; Gudelunas, ‘Culture Jamming’, p. 236.
(baibian wuxia) and presented many well-received group impersonations.\textsuperscript{134} The two female impersonation masters, Qu and Jia, were often asked to perform together, and, on the surface, their performances seemed to reveal the show’s queer and feminist potential to challenge and mock binarist gender ideals. Nevertheless, various forms of sociocultural hierarchy and discrimination were enshrined in the Chinese-specific gendering and globalising discourses that surrounded the two performers’ seemingly postfeminist personae, and this underwrote the show’s persistent consolidation of the official culture’s imaginary of normatively defined Chinese womanhood.

Figure 4.18: A poster showing the two actresses Qu (right) and Jia (left) in the fifth season of \textit{YFSF}. They are impersonating the Korean male actor Lee MinHo, who is famous for his ‘flower-like’ beautiful yet masculine look and the French actress Sophie Marceau, who became known to Chinese audiences for her elegant celebrity persona.\textsuperscript{135}

In recent years, Qu’s and Jia’s star personas and TV performances, especially those associated with \textit{YFSF}, have complicated contemporary Chinese postfeminist pop culture.\textsuperscript{136} Jinhua Li finds that, in contrast to Western

\textsuperscript{134} The other three male celebrities are Da Zhang Wei, Bai Kainan and Shen Ling, whose \textit{YFSF} impersonations also emphasised gender parody.

\textsuperscript{135} The performance was in the episode aired on 13 March 2014.

\textsuperscript{136} See http://chuangcn.org/2015/03/gala/
postfeminism, Chinese postfeminist culture, which since the late 1990s has manifested largely in ‘chick-flicks’ and local pop fiction, ‘attempt[s] to disassociate from previous totalitarian feminist traditions’. It ‘requires a full embrace of femininity, portraying [Chinese] postfeminist Woman as financially independent, emotionally mature, and sexually conscious, a person who seldom verbalizes her conscious feminist stance or articulates radical political statements’. Chinese feminist scholar Xin Huang also explains that this Chinese-specific postfeminism contributes to the public imagining of a new, ‘modernised’ Chinese woman by ‘appropriating resources and inspiration from official and popular discourses, as well as from various previously rejected historical and cultural gender projects’.

As briefly discussed in Chapter One, the depoliticised or apolitical stance of Chinese postfeminism is largely the result of historical and political traumas caused by the socialist pseudo-feminism enforced by the state during the Maoist era, in accordance with which ‘the liberation of women [was] concomitant with a process of gender erasure’. Chinese cultural studies scholar Sheldon Hsio-peng Lu believes that during those socialist feminist years, Chinese women were transformed into ‘asexual’ political tools and symbols that were ‘completely inscribed within official discourse on gender and institutionalised by’ the state’s feminist organisations. By contrast, contemporary Chinese postfeminism, which emerged from the neoliberal and consumerist cultures of the post-Mao era, emphasises a reassertion of feminine gender identity, sexual agency and individuality through the social-

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138 Ibid. Also see, Eva Yin-I Chen, ‘Shanghai Baby as a Chinese Click-Lit: Female Empowerment and Neoliberal Consumerist Agency’, *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 15:1 (2009), pp. 54-93.
139 Huang, ‘Performing Gender’, p. 88.
political project of modernising and globalising China or ‘becoming “modernly Chinese”’. This means, in the words of F. Liu, maintaining a ‘balance between the “modern” and the “Chinese” in defining ideals for women’. To achieve this goal, the official culture requires contemporary (postfeminist) women not only to ‘invest in their “feminine beauty”’ but also to ‘cultivate and display female qualities in line with Chinese tradition rather than the stereotypically individualistic, assertive, hedonistic or even defiant western woman’. Situated within such a complex postfeminist discourse, Qu and Jia’s YFSF performances became an arena for simultaneously interrogating and re-inscribing the party-state’s gendered ideologies and imaginings of contemporary Chinese womanhood in transcultural, interethnic, global contexts.

4.2. Parodying the ‘goddess’ and the ‘manly lady’ on YFSF

As unmarried, independent, professional women, both Qu and Jia seem to voice certain types of postfeminist positions and subjectivity. Qu is a former Chinese supermodel and pop singer who had a prolific presence on the runways in the 1990s and featured in a number of well-known heterosexual romance films and TV dramas in the late 1990s and early 2000s (fig. 4.19). Xiaoping Li’s research shows that in the 1990s when Chinese society was characterised by marketisation and consumerism, ‘the fashion model [became] the ultimate archetype of beauty, dominating the iconography of women. Fashion and fashion models are essential to the manufacturing of both modern women and modern lifestyles’. Thus, Qu’s rise to stardom for her fashionable, urban appearance and world-famous identity as a model

143 Liu, ‘From Degendering’, p. 18.
positioned her as a perfect example of the Chinese ‘goddess’ type (nüshen; also known as Ms Bai Fu Mei).

The slang term ‘goddess’ has become a widely used feminine gender label in 21st-century Chinese grassroots culture. It refers to a woman with “desirable” feminine traits [such] as physical beauty, attractive body shape, and graceful demeanour. The popular gendered phrase ‘Ms Bai Fu Mei’, which literally means a white (referring to light skin colour), rich, pretty woman, is also frequently used to describe the goddess type in post-2000 China. Interestingly, however, although Qu embodies certain features of the goddess type, her public image has also been shaped by her constant subversion of traditional Chinese feminine ideals in the entertainment media (such as the normatively defined qualities of being reserved in manner, docile, clingy and domesticated). One notable example of this subversion is her sensational appearance in the Chinese movie Keep Cool (Youhua Haohao Shuo; Zhang Yimou, Guangxi Film Studio, China, 1997), where she plays the female

Figure 4.19: Qu as a fashion model, during a photo shoot

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\[148\] Ibid, p. 249.

\[149\] Ibid.
protagonist An Hong, a beautiful, yet rebellious young woman with short, spiky, boyish hair. In addition, Qu’s impish sense of humour was also well-known to Chinese audiences from her frequent comedy performances on variety and talk shows. Moreover, in many of her personal life choices, Qu has not conformed to Confucian expectations of adult women, such as the pressure to get married and give birth at a ‘proper’ age and be ‘a virtuous wife and a good mother’ (*xiangqi liangmu*).\(^{150}\) Wei Luo and Zhen Sun’s research on Chinese dating reality TV programmes shows that, in recent years, a growing number of young Chinese woman have become well-known and have obtained extensive fan bases for their intentional displays of ‘‘desirable’’ [goddess type] feminine traits’ and their repeated and pronounced emphasising of their materialistic goals for success in marriage and romance, such as marrying into rich, powerful families.\(^{151}\) In contrast to these ‘goddesses’ on Chinese TV, Qu, a successful woman in her forties who has had a long, stable relationship with her musician boyfriend, has emphasised in media interviews the central role of love rather than marriage or money in her life.\(^{152}\)

In contrast to Qu’s fine ‘goddess’ image, Jia’s bearing, both on- and offstage, embodies another Chinese female gender stereotype—the homely, dumpy and rustic woman (*tu fei yuan*) with an affable, unpretentious personality (fig. 4.20). She has often been labelled as a ‘manly lady’ (*nü hanzi*)——as I discussed in Chapter One, another recently coined Chinese cyber term that describes tough women who defy their assigned gender identity, challenge the alignment of maleness with masculinity, are both mentally and physically strong, are ‘not inferior to men’ and do not care ‘much about their appearance’.*\(^{153}\) Although the term, ‘*nü hanzi*’, was originally invented to satirise masculine women who did not conform to traditional Chinese

\(^{150}\) For a detailed discussion on the refashioning of feminine qualities in traditional Chinese cultures, see Elisabeth J. Croll, *Changing Identity of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-Perception in the Twentieth-Century China* (Hong Kong: HKUP, 1995).

\(^{151}\) Luo and Sun, ‘Are You the One?’, p. 249, pp. 239-256.

\(^{152}\) For example, see [http://www.chinanews.com/vl/2016/07-07/7930721.shtml](http://www.chinanews.com/vl/2016/07-07/7930721.shtml)

femininities, it has gradually become a postfeminist label with self-contradictory use and meanings that celebrates women’s perseverance, independence, and subjectivity in both their private and public lives while also carrying patriarchal and nationalistic connotations (especially when being used by men to describe women in Chinese mass media and public culture). In particular, Jia first became known as one of only a few female crosstalk (a form of traditional Chinese comic-dialogue art) comedians in Mainland China, which was mainly due to the largely sexist, male-dominated culture and history of Chinese crosstalk. She has performed in various short TV sketches and variety shows in recent years, and her chubby body and boyish, reckless behaviour have often been exaggerated and have highlighted the comedy of her performances, sometimes even in discriminatory ways. Nevertheless, she constantly claims publicly that she loves her job and does not mind being ridiculed for her comedic performances. She also asserts that she will not change herself to please others.

Figure 4.20: A screen capture of Jia playing an overconfident, unattractive, and reckless ‘manly lady’ in a variety TV programme.

The two female celebrities’ star personas—Qu’s goddess appearance and Jia’s manly lady style—did not simply reify Chinese society’s patriarchal prescriptions for female-embodied femininities, nor did they present a straightforward display of Chinese (post-)feminism. Their YFSF appearances often drew on and negotiated their celebrity images, which created a more complex gendering, re-gendering and cross-gendering process that showcases the coexistence of the queer and normative facets of the show.

4.3. Re-normalising Chineseness through a revised global queer gaze

YFSF’s unique cultural-televisual style further emphasised the sharp contrast between the pair’s differing images and feminine gender types. For instance, in one well-received cross-dressing duet, which aired on 28 March 2013, Qu impersonated the legendary Taiwanese American male singer Fei Xiang, who is famous for his cosmopolitan identity, biracial look and beautiful voice (as discussed in Chapter One), while Jia impersonated the Mainland Chinese movie actor Wang Baoqiang, who is widely recognised for his embodiment of the earthy, simple-hearted but coarse masculinity of Chinese men from underdeveloped, rural areas (fig. 4.21). The performance was accompanied by an audio-visual comic mix of Fei’s most famous song ‘Winter Fire’ (Dongtian Lide Yibahuo) and the Taiwanese pop song ‘Fire’ (Huo).

Figure 4.21: A poster of Qu and Jia parodying Chinese-speaking male stars Fei Xiang and Wang Baoqiang.
At the beginning of the performance, dressed in a costume similar to the classic tuxedo Fei wore for his legendary appearance at the 1987 Spring Festival Gala, Qu, accompanied by a team of dancers, sang and danced to the remixed music. Multiple digital editing techniques, such as the use of a nostalgic filter and rotating and bouncing shots, created a spectacular, disco-style scene in the opening shots, after which Jia made her entrance on the back of a motorcycle, singing the lyrics with a heavy Sichuan accent. She jumped off the motorcycle and joined Qu’s dance. In contrast to Qu’s classy suit, Jia was dressed in a casual T-shirt and loose pants to imitate the lower-class, tasteless, unsophisticated, rural migrant male lead in Lost in Thailand, one of the most successful comedies in Chinese film history (Renzai Jiongtuzhi Taijiong, Xu Zheng, Beijing Enlight Pictures, China, 2012). This was the actor Wang’s most well-known cinematic appearance and showcased the typical, country boy image he personified. In the following sequence, during which the pair sang and danced, Jia constantly performed goofy moves and interrupted Qu’s impersonation by addressing her with nonsensical interjections in a Chinese dialect, such as ‘Do you want to eat an egg?’ (chi jidan bu?) and ‘To do something meaningful’ (zuo youyi de shi’er), some of which were classic lines from the movie Lost in Thailand or lyrics of the song ‘Fire’.

This parodic sequence was carefully designed and rehearsed and filled with satire and meaningless, spoofing acts. It presented a postmodern cultural-visual mashup of two kinds of Chinese male masculinity, typified by the male stars Fei and Wang. As mentioned in Chapter Two on the Chinese talk show The Jinxing Show, Fei’s combined bilingual and multiracial (half-Chinese, half-American) identity made him an ideal icon of cosmopolitan, civilised, charming Chinese male masculinity in a cross-ethnic context. His gendered persona exemplifies the ‘male god’ (nanshen or Mr Gao Fu Shuai)—a label for Chinese men who are highly educated, tall, rich, handsome, of a high social status, urban, cosmopolitan, and regarded as perfect husbands for ‘goddess’ women. By contrast, Wang represented a typical ‘pubic hair’ man (diaosi nan or Mr Ai Qiong Cuo), who is imagined in Chinese public culture.
as short, poor, ugly and a loser in both his career and his private life (fig. 4.22).\textsuperscript{156}

![Figure 4.22: A screen capture of the Chinese male actor Wang Baoqiang who plays the role of a lower-class young Chinese man from a rural area in the movie Lost in Thailand.](image)

As Chinese masculinity studies scholar Derek Hird notes, in contemporary Chinese culture, ‘the gentle, restrained model of masculinity’ of men with ‘high levels of economic and educational capital’ are often interpreted as a gendered (though not necessarily non-heterosexual) performance of ‘quality, politeness and civility’.\textsuperscript{157} As Hird explains, this form of male masculinity often ‘reinscrib[es] postsocialist discourses that privilege the urban middle classes and condemn rural migrants as ignorant, impolite, and unsophisticated’.\textsuperscript{158} Presenting these two stereotypical, class-based images of Chinese men (and male masculinities) side by side in the same cross-dressing act has multi-layered gender implications. On the one hand, it denaturalises those gendered imaginaries and binarisms by having women imitate and ridicule male masculine stereotypes in theatrical forms of mockery and self-

\textsuperscript{156} For detailed discussions on these two gendered labels for Chinese men, see Peidong Yang, Lijun Tang and Xuan Wang, ‘Diaosi as Infrapolitics: Scatological Tropes, Identity-Making and Cultural Intimacy on China’s Internet’, \textit{Media, Culture & Society} 37:2 (2015), pp. 197-214.


\textsuperscript{158} Ibid. Also see, Ann Anagnost, ‘The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Su{\ii zh}i)’, \textit{Public Culture} 16:2 (2004), p. 190.
mockery. On the other hand, this humorous performance also, to some extent, reinforces the sociocultural hierarchies that fashion idealised images of modernised Chinese men and women (embodied by Fei and Qu) and caricature ordinary, less successful and less globalised or civilised social groups of both genders (embodied by Wang and Jia). This doubly gendered, re-normalising process is further revealed in the interactions between the hosts, the judges and the two celebrities after the performance.

Qu’s impersonation of Fei, although it also incorporated exaggerated and parodic elements, was well-received and lauded by the hosts and the judges, while the hosts, in a joking manner, asked Jia whether she was ‘mentally ill’ (naozi youbing). Jia raised her voice and, in a self-mocking manner, asked if the hosts had the medicine to treat her mental disease. In one particular shot of the post-performance interview, Jia’s question, ‘Do you have the medicine?’ (ni you yao a?), was enlarged in Chinese characters and superimposed on her (fig. 4.23). This visual special effect highlighted Jia’s reckless and un-‘modernly Chinese’ behaviour both during and after the performance. It encapsulated the ‘inappropriateness’ and humour of the impersonation and weakened its queer connotations by emphasising the ‘abnormality’ of Jia’s staged cross-gender act. Furthermore, the post-performance visual-cultural exaggeration and mockery of lower-class people’s down-to-earth demeanour consolidated sociocultural biases toward this social group, presenting them as unnatural in terms of gender and sexually unattractive. In contrast, both the performance and the post-performance conversation carefully attributed the successful subversion of gender roles in Qu’s impersonation to a high-class, cosmopolitan persona and elegant manners. Through these means, Qu’s cross-gender performances, as well as Fei’s own potential gayness and explicit male effeminacy (as discussed in Chapter One about Fei’s cosmopolitan appearance and performance in The Jinxing Show, which represented a form of ‘de-gayed’ global Chinese male masculinity featured patriotism, gentleness and softness), were rendered as not-so-‘unserious’ thus close-to-‘becoming’ the gender ideals of being ‘modernly Chinese’. This kind of cross-gender
impersonations that may contribute to the gendered national image of China in a transcultural, interethnic stage were celebrated.

Figure 4.23: A post-performance screen capture showing Jia urging the host standing next to her to ‘eat an egg’. Jia’s response to the host’s enquiry whether she was mentally ill was superimposed on the screen.

The contrasting attitudes toward Qu’s and Jia’s performances, though often expressed in terms of a ‘comedic roast’, can be seen in the responses to other performances by the pair in YFSF. On the show, Qu was often asked to impersonate handsome men, such as the Chinese singer Mao Ning, the Hong Kong celebrity Andy Lau Tak-wah, or the Russian tenor singer Vitaliy Vladasovich Grachov (aka Vitas). The judges and hosts also regularly used the trans-Asian K-pop term ‘flower-like man’ (huameinan) to describe and applaud Qu’s cross-dressing appearance. Similar to that discussed in relation to the androgynous participants in reality singing competitions in Chapter Three, this inter-Asian cultural referencing helped to legitimise and ‘de-gay’ Qu’s performances and those of the male stars being impersonated.

By contrast, Jia’s impersonations often parodied husky local male celebrities with plain looks, such as the Chinese singers Teng Geer, Huo Feng, Liu Huan, and Zhou Xiao’ou. Even the female stars that Jia impersonated were often those who did not conform to traditional notions of femininity or have the kind of ideal female body types prescribed by the dominant patriarchal culture, such as the Chinese tomboyish SVG star Li Yuchun or the plus-sized British singer Adele Laurie Blue Adkins. These impersonations of Jia might
be gender-nonnormative in nature. Nevertheless, these staged performances often served as ways to represent ‘various forms of femininity’, while the queer dimension of the impersonations were downplayed through the show’s persistent emphasising of the heterosexual dimension of these celebrities’ real life.\textsuperscript{159} Certainly, these impersonation choices may have been the personal choices of Qu and Jia in accordance with their different looks and body shapes. However, after the performances, when the theatricality of the show had ended and the hosts and judges were interacting with Qu and Jia in the style of a reality competition, the importance of conforming to normative social expectations in the nontheatrical, real world was often implied. For instance, jokes about Jia’s singedom were often made by the hosts after these performances. This re-normalising aspect of the show not only drew on social class-based expectations but also incorporated China’s self-imagining as a modern, powerful nation that deals with the harassment from, and imprudence of, non-Chinese people, cultures and countries with decency, generosity and forgiveness.

The pair’s sensational impersonation in the episode broadcast on 14 March 2013 is a particularly relevant and interesting example. In this episode, Qu and Jia impersonated the Canadian pop singer Celine Dion and the renowned Chinese folk singer Song Zuying, reproducing their performance of the popular Chinese folk song ‘Jasmine Flower’ (\textit{Molihua}) for the 2013 \textit{Spring Festival Gala} (figs. 4.24 and 4.25). The song has a long tradition in China and carries complex cultural-political implications for Chinese interethic relationships. Widely known to Han Chinese people in the southern region of pre-modern China since the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, the song was played to European people as the national anthem during the Qing Dynasty (when China was ruled by Manchu people——an ethnic minority nomadic group in the northeast of premodern East Asia).\textsuperscript{160} Later, the song was adapted and used in the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini’s famous opera \textit{Turandot} (Italy, 1926).\textsuperscript{161} Notably, the opera and Puccini’s other works, such as \textit{Madame

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\textsuperscript{159} Liu, ‘From Degendering’, p. 18.


Butterfly (Italy, 1904), have been criticised for their Western stereotyping of the East, especially for their gendered and sexualised exoticisation of Asian women.\textsuperscript{162} Chinese scholar Hong Yu has referred to \textit{Turandot}, the story of which was set in Beijing, as ‘the product of early 20\textsuperscript{th} century Orientalism’.\textsuperscript{163} As Yu explains, the opera embodies Edward Said’s definition of Orientalist discourse,\textsuperscript{164} in which ‘the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences’.\textsuperscript{165} Mosco Carner also points out that Puccini’s Orientalism may have emerged from the inspiration he gained from foreign music, which might, in turn, have contributed to his unique musical style that merged and reinvented diverse artistic elements from non-Western cultures.\textsuperscript{166} In this sense, Puccini’s Orientalist adaptation of the song ‘Jasmine Flower’ can be seen as a dual glocalist expression of Italian opera and musical cultures.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{A screen capture of the original duet of the song ‘Jasmine Flower’ by Celine Dion and Song Zuying for the 2013 CCTV \textit{Spring Festival Gala}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
Since the new millennium, the song ‘Jasmine Flower’ has been performed at Chinese national events, such as the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2013 annual Spring Festival Gala. Notably, since the 1950s, the PRC government has officially recognised fifty-five ‘minority nationalities’ (shaoshu minzu; excluding Han) in Han-dominated modern China. As anthropologist Dru C. Gladney points out, the contemporary Chinese party-state represents itself to its citizens ‘and to its international sphere’ as ‘a multi-ethnic and multinational state’. In their 2015 study, Chen Liu, Ning An and Hong Zhu found that the songs performed on the Gala over the years often served as ‘important constitutions of China’s state apparatus’. In fact, the Gala has a long tradition of attempting to politically unite China’s fifty-six ethnic groups by having non-Han Chinese groups in


colourful, ethnic costumes dance and sing to the mainly Han studio audience.\(^\text{170}\) As Gladney argues, this representation of ethnic minority groups on the Gala resembles ‘the “tribute” offerings of the ancient Chinese empires’.\(^\text{171}\)

Moreover, in the 2010s, it became common to invite Western female celebrities to sing on the Gala.\(^\text{172}\) Besides Celine Dion’s performance on the 2013 Gala, Sophie Marceau sang the well-known folk song *La vie en rose* in both French and Mandarin on the 2014 Gala. Marceau performed together with the famous Mainland Chinese male musician Liu Huan who is also fluent in French and an expert in French music. In addition, Chinese music scholar Jie Jin notes that the song ‘Jasmine Flower’ has in recent years often been performed often by white foreigners on Chinese TV.\(^\text{173}\) In 2017, the granddaughter of the current American President, Donald Trump, sang the song in Mandarin to China’s President Xi Jinping during Xi’s visit to the US.\(^\text{174}\) These instances suggest that the public performance of Chinese songs (or foreign-language songs in Chinese) by foreigners has become a way of showing respect to the ethnic-majority Han culture and people (although, the practice is largely Orientalist, ‘self-Orientalist’\(^\text{175}\), or ‘internal-Orientalist’\(^\text{176}\)). This Orientalist twist in the transnational circulation and performance of ‘Jasmine Flower’ was further complicated by the 2013 Gala performance.

The original duet on the Gala was well-received by the audience, especially the part in which Dion sang the song in Mandarin with a foreigner’s accent. Andrew Chubb’s research on contemporary Mainland Chinese TV competitions featuring foreigners learning to speak Mandarin shows that the appeal of such programmes for Chinese TV viewers can be explained by the


\(^{171}\) Ibid, p. 96.


\(^{173}\) Jin, *Chinese Music*, p. 82.


\(^{176}\) See, Schein, ‘Gender and Internal Orientalism in China’, pp. 69-98.
fact that, since the 2000s, ‘China’s state media have pointedly used the fact of foreigners learning Mandarin to appeal to a sense of national pride at home and … in support of national educational goals related to proficiency in the “standard language”’.¹⁷⁷ Thus, showing overseas Chinese and foreigners, especially world-renowned Caucasian Anglophone singers such as Dion, singing in Mandarin helps ‘glorify the superiority of the Chinese race and their culture’¹⁷⁸ and encourages the local audience ‘to appreciate their own proficiency in [Mandarin] as a desirable and powerful asset’.¹⁷⁹ More interestingly, Dion’s performance partner, Song, is an ethnic Miao (Hmong) Chinese. To the audience of the show, most of whom were Han Chinese, both Miao people and Caucasian foreigners are minorities. Pairing two ‘minority’ performers on the stage of the Gala undoubtedly doubled the propagandistic impact of the performance. Gladney suggests that the othering and objectification of minority people and cultures for the gaze of a Han Chinese audience are ‘essential to … the very formulation of the Chinese “nation” itself’.¹⁸⁰ He elaborates,

The representation of the ‘minority’ in China reflects the objectivizing of a ‘majority’ nationality discourse that parallels the valorization of gender and political hierarchies. This process reverses subject/object distinctions and suggests the following parallels: Minority is to the majority as female is to male, as ‘Third’ World is to ‘First’, and as subjectivized is to objectivized identity. The widespread definition and representation of the ‘minority’ as exotic, colourful, and ‘primitive’ homogenizes the undefined majority as united, monoethnic, and modern.¹⁸¹

While the main focus of Gladney’s discussion is the relationality of majority and minority ethnic groups geopolitically affiliated with the ‘Chinese’ nationality and culturally situated within Mainland Chinese society, his argument is useful for interpreting images of non-Chinese (Western) foreign others on the 21st-century Chinese TV. As Rey Chow notes, Western cultures

¹⁸⁰ Gladney, ‘Representing Nationality in China’, p. 94.
¹⁸¹ Ibid, p. 93.
tend to associate China with the feminine and to fetishise it as both ‘victim’ and ‘empire’.\textsuperscript{182} Meanwhile, as film scholar Gina Marchetti demonstrates, China, constructed as a ‘Third World’ nation within a Western economic-political framework, is also stereotyped in the Western pop cultural imagination as the ‘yellow peril’ that epitomises Western ‘racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East’.\textsuperscript{183} The global ‘gaze’ discussed by both Chow and Marchetti was, to some extent, deconstructed in the Gala’s representation of ethnic minority Chinese and foreigners performing Chinese songs to a Chinese audience. In this scene, the presence of a Caucasian woman from a ‘First World’ country subverted the First World/Third World dyad by symbolising China’s rise as a modern ‘empire’ on the global stage to both its citizens and other nation-states. This reversed ‘global gaze’ constructed by the Gala performance (gazing from the perspective of the contemporary mainstream Chinese media) was further complicated and emphasised in YFSF. On the one hand, the satirical re-enactment of this performance by Qu and Jia enlarged the symbolic construction of national identity and pride in an age of globalisation through a gender-parodic imitation and transnational, interethnic comparison. On the other, this transcultural gender parody represented a politically charged scene in which a cultured, rational Chinese (embodied by Qu) was constantly disturbed by an unruly, rude foreign saboteur (represented by Jia).

In the YFSF parody, Qu, dressed as Song in an evening gown, began to sing alone at the centre of the stage. The shot was taken from a slightly lower angle to simulate the audience’s perspective, with lighting from laser beams coming from the back and the two sides of the stage to recreate the theatrical atmosphere of the original performance. Qu’s singing soon won sighs of admiration and applause from the live studio audience. Impersonating Dion, Jia was dressed in a tight striped shimmering dress that seemed too small for


her. While Qu was singing, Jia slowly appeared in the time lift. In the next shot, Jia walked out of the lift making hyperbolic, pretentious gestures and began to sing the song in Mandarin in a non-native accent. In the following close-up shot, the sharp contrast between Jia’s appearance and the original images of Dion displayed on the PiP screen at the left bottom of the frame elicited laughter from the audience. Qu then walked into frame and began singing with Jia. However, during the duet, Jia suddenly started to sing the pop song ‘Standing on the High Mountain’ (Zhanzai Gaogangshang) by the Taiwanese indigenous female singer Chang Hui-mei. Jia also constantly interrupted Qu’s performance of ‘Jasmine Flower’ by uttering nonsensical words in English, Mandarin and regional Chinese dialects. From time to time, the sound of Qu’s singing was completely drowned out by Jia’s loud spoofing and off-key singing. In response to Jia’s disruptive acts, Qu made embarrassed, unhappy and distracted facial expressions but maintained decorum. Meanwhile, Jia continued making exaggerated gestures and upstaging Qu.

After the performance ended, the camera zoomed in on one of the celebrity judges who was sitting beside the stage dressed as the character Legolas Greenleaf from the fantasy film trilogy The Lord of the Rings (Peter Jackson, New Line Cinema, New Zealand/USA, 2001-2003). The judge was pulling the drawstring of a bow and pointing the arrow at Jia. The hosts and the other judges explained in their synchronous commentary on this playful act that the judge could not bear Jia’s ludicrous impersonation of Dion, which he thought ‘ruined’ the entire performance, and wanted to shoot Jia off the stage. Jia responded in a pseudo-self-deprecating manner: ‘Nobody cares about my feelings, I’m from a foreign place!’ Then, the hosts walked onto the stage and joked that Jia’s revealing dress made her oversized body more visible to the audience while complimenting Qu on her ‘outstanding’ looks and singing. Later in the conversation, the hosts unwillingly admitted that Jia looked ‘beautiful’ and ‘respectable’ and that she was working so hard and even ‘putting her life on the line’ for this impersonation (yong shengming zai biaoyan). This comment poked fun at the fact that Jia’s exaggerated, parodic act destroyed her public image (as an adult, reasonable Chinese woman and
a well-trained professional comedian in contrast to her disruptive, reckless actions on the show). After making these satirical comments, the hosts asked Jia to perform her routine, signature act, which involved looking directly into the camera and uttering the tagline ‘I have always been beautiful’ (wo benlai jiu henmei).

This routine act of Jia’s on YFSF is worthy of further discussion as it was a well-known satirical highlight of the show. After each of Jia’s comedic performances in YFSF, especially those involving cross-dressing, the hosts would have her repeat this slogan to show the audience that she had finished the impersonation and reverted to her ‘real-world’ state as an ‘authentic’ woman. However, right after Jia repeated the line, her image would usually be ‘keyed out’, ‘torn apart’ or ‘shattered into pieces’ using visual effects (fig. 4.26). The dramatic visual manifestations indicated that what Jia had said was untrue and that her performance was ‘unnatural’ or ‘abnormal’ (nitian) and should not exist outside of the theatrical mise en scène. Similarly, in this episode, a flashback to Jia’s YFSF performances followed the tagline and certain satirical comments, such as ‘You have the soul of a real man but were born in a woman’s body’ and ‘When you find a good man, just marry him’, were superimposed on the flashback scenes. The camera then cut back to the stage, which represented the nonfictional real world, and Jia responded that participating in YFSF’s competitions as she did had made her give up on the idea of getting married. Then, the hosts turned to Qu, praised her impersonation again and asked how she managed to do such a great job with a person like Jia standing beside her. Qu responded in a bantering way that it required ‘generosity and tolerance’ (dadu).
Figure 4.26: A screen capture of the visual effects applied to Jia’s shots after her parody of a beautiful female star. Her image was struck and torn by digital lightning. The Chinese characters on the screen literally mean ‘being shot through the heart by tens of thousands of arrows’ (wanjian chuanxin).

On multiple levels, this sequence exemplifies the hierarchising and othering discourse surrounding the show’s image of the modern Chinese Woman. Both Qu (in her mid-forties) and Jia (in her mid-thirties) belong to an age group of unmarried women regarded as ‘leftover’ females (shengnü) labelled by the official, mainstream media of contemporary China.\(^{184}\) As discussed in Chapter One, the term epitomises the Chinese-specific heteropatriarchal and misogynistic beliefs that the party-state has promoted in recent years to stigmatise highly educated or professional women who remain single after their mid-twenties.\(^{185}\) However, Qu’s ‘goddess’ appearance sustained, to some extent, the ideology that ‘no matter how successful, the woman has not lost her femininity: gentleness … and female beauty/elegant appearance based on both inner self-cultivation and smart commercial choice’.\(^{186}\) Qu’s unmarried status was rarely mentioned in YFSF, and her satirical and bold performances, which either directly ridiculed gender stereotypes or discursively contributed to her performance partner’s (Jia’s) mockery of these gender ideals, were interpreted as displaying the feminine qualities of the


\(^{185}\) Ibid.

\(^{186}\) Liu, ‘From Degendering’, p. 21.
modern Chinese Woman: grace, generosity, assiduousness, attentiveness and modesty.

In contrast, Jia’s ‘imperfect’ appearance and ‘manly lady’ style were often exaggerated and served as comic highlights in both her self-mocking performances and the commentary from the judges and hosts. A notable example of this exaggeration is the parodic use of Jia’s nickname ‘Jia Big Ling’ (Jia Daling) on the show. This nickname, commonly used by the hosts and her performance partners, mocked her body size by adding the word ‘big’ between her first and last names. However, this name also sounds phonetically the same as the Chinese popular phrase ‘being old’ (*daling*), which is often used in Chinese public culture to shame people, especially women, who are old and long past the legal age for marriage (implying that they are unsuccessful in their careers and private lives). The use of this nickname to refer to Jia repeatedly emphasised the fact that she does not fit into the official definition of the modern Chinese Woman who can manage her weight, has ‘proper’ feminine qualities, and is beautiful and thus marriageable. The persistent commentary on her unmarried status mocked her for both her body and her age, whereas Qu’s unmarried status was seen as a manifestation of her independence and autonomy, which are also qualities of the ideal modern Chinese Woman.

Furthermore, this interethnic impersonation demonstrates that the official culture’s gendered imagining of an ideal modern Chinese Woman can also be constructed and reinforced by parodying the foreign Other. As Lu notes, ‘the construction of Chinese masculinity through the foreign woman has become a new way of imagining national identity in the age of globalization’. When discussing the gendered discourse of Chinese visual culture in the 1990s, Lu finds,

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187 The legal marrying age for Chinese women is 20-year-old. The sociocultural pressure to marry has deep historical roots in Chinese culture and is also closely associated with the Chinese Communist belief that a high marriage rate can contribute to the construction of a harmonious society and the stability of the entire nation. For a detailed discussion, see Fincher, *Leftover Women*, pp. 1-43.

In the Chinese domestic cultural market ... [to] fulfil the expectations, fantasies, desires, and self-knowledge of indigenous, local Chinese, the media must project a sense of globalism, not ‘tribalism’. The other, the foreign, must be exoticized, eroticized, and, at times, subalternized. Moreover, the initial exoticization of the foreign must ultimately be accompanied by domestication, taming, and a literal [heterosexual] marriage of foreigners and Chinese .... As both a late-comer nation-state and an ancient empire, China vindicates itself in the narrative of the universal history of capitalism and modernity.

In a more complicated manner, YFSF aligned the image of a Western woman with that of a state-backed ‘modern non-Han Chinese woman’ through a cross-cultural, interethnic impersonation. Furthermore, the performance of the Taiwanese pop song ‘Standing on the High Mountain’ to create comedic effects introduced another layer of ethnic connotations to the duet. The song was composed in 1953 for a Hong Kong film *The Nightingale of Alishan* (Wang Tianlin, Xianhua Film Company, HK, 1953) about an interethnic romance between an indigenous woman and a Han Taiwanese man. In 1997, the contemporary Taiwanese indigenous pop diva Chang covered the song, making it famous in the Chinese-language music world. The song incorporates some elements of indigenous music elements and is often mistakenly regarded as an indigenous Taiwanese folk song. Therefore, the parodic performance of the song on YFSF might also signify another ethnic ‘minority nationality’ in the fifty-six recognised by the PRC government—the Taiwanese High Mountain people (*taiwan gaoshan ren*). In fact, this Chinese ethnic category essentialises all the indigenous groups on the island of Taiwan. More ironically, the use of the term ‘gaoshan’ was introduced during the Qing Dynasty to refer to ‘uncivilised’ aborigines in Taiwan that were not assimilated into the Han Chinese culture. In addition, in the light of the historical and contemporary political tensions across the Taiwan Straits caused by the dispute over Taiwanese sovereignty, this interethnic interlude

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189 See http://jollybighead2.pixnet.net/blog/post/46483060-%5B-%E7%AB%A5%E8%BB%8D%E6%AD%8C%E6%9B%B2-%5D-%E5%8E%9F%E4%BD%8F%E6%B0%91%E6%AD%8C%E6%9B%B2-%28-%E5%9B%9B-%52----%E9%98%BF%E9%87%8C%E5%B1%B1%E4%B9%8B%E9%B6%AF-


of the performance can be regarded as a politicised, racist caricature, especially since the indigenous singer Chang, who made this song famous in Mainland China, was considered a supporter of Taiwanese Independence and was banned from Mainland Chinese mainstream media and public cultures between 2000 and 2007. On the one hand, by incorporating these political-cultural-ethnic subtleties, Qu and Jia’s performance satisfied the national, cultural, ethnic and linguistic pride of the local Chinese, especially through Jia’s exaggeratedly ‘bad’ singing. Jia’s ‘failed’ impersonation of the foreigner, especially a public figure who has been famous for her glamorous (hyper)femininity and known as a camp icon in the Western world, also aligned this gender-nonnormativity represented by Dion with the culturally ‘uncivilised’ and politically ‘untamed’ Taiwanese aborigine and thus implicitly mocked both forms of non-Han-Chinese femininities. On the other hand, Jia’s impersonation discursively legitimised the grace and decorum of the ‘proper’ modern Chinese postfeminist femininity embodied by Qu, as well as that demonstrated by the Miao singer Song on the Gala. This interethnic transcultural encounter created a new gendered and ethnicised sociocultural order. In this newly formed social-political hierarchy, Han-Chinese female gender norms (which emphasise the alignment of modernity and Chineseness) were presented as the ultimate ideal. In particular, Jia’s non-traditionally gendered, parodic behaviour and appearance were constantly presented as ‘foreign’, ‘abnormal’, and ‘crazy’ and as inappropriate for a contemporary modern, globalised China.

Both the Gala performance and the YFSF impersonation sanction those Han and ethnic minority Chinese women who are able to embody this set of gender norms. In comedic ways, the YFSF duet further mocked foreign and politically and culturally deviant ethnic minorities who do not conform to the idealised image of the modern Chinese Woman prescribed by the Han-dominated patriarchal culture of the PRC. Therefore, the latter categories of women can only either pay tribute to the nation from the position of minority ‘Other’ or be cast out as ‘primitive’ and ‘disruptive’ elements. All these

visual-cultural signs and metaphors employ various forms of gendered, ethnicised irony, transgression and iconoclasm to create a China-centred global queer gaze. Yet, this new gaze ultimately endeavours to reassert the normatively gendered, modernised images of China against the foil of a foreign or ethnic Other.

5. Conclusion
As my analysis in this chapter has demonstrated, *YFSF* opened up a spectacular queer space for performers, especially women who do not conform to traditional Chinese female gender and sexual ideals, to transgress gender and other sociocultural boundaries in their gender-parodic performances. Unlike mainstream TV programmes, such as the *Gala* on CCTV, which was produced and monitored by the Chinese government who used it as a propagandistic tool, *YFSF* succeeded in presenting a large number of cross-gender impersonations. It also encouraged many celebrities who might have been closeted LGBTQ people, such as the aforementioned Zhu Zixiao, or who had the potential to perform in gender-parodic ways, such as Jia, to participate in the show. Moreover, as a celebrity-participation reality show that was adapted from a Western format and incorporated both local and global queer and transgender cultural elements, *YFSF* staged queer-loaded impersonations that negotiated with the dominant gender/sex stereotypes in mainstream Chinese society, especially that of the modernly Chinese Woman defined in a culturally specific postfeminist pop culture. In many cases, to a certain degree, the show’s comedic, hyperbolic features helped save the cross-gender performers from mainstream society’s policing of gender and sexual normativities, particularly through ‘failing’ or ‘de-gaying’ the queer connotations of their gender performances and the personas presented. In addition, the show’s creative use of visual-cultural techniques constructed a televisual space for parodic (as both humorous and socioculturally transgressive) performances within the mainstream media environment. Nevertheless, the norm-negotiating, queer-initiating power of the show was persistently overshadowed and sometimes it even re-normalised gender-related sociocultural ideologies endorsed by the party-state. In particular, the gender parodies of the two popular female celebrity
participants Qu and Jia often ridiculed and marginalised lower-class people, ethnic minorities or social-political dissidents who did not contribute to the image of a modern, powerful China in a globalised world. By these means, the show ultimately created a reversed, China-centric, global queer gaze that exemplified the queer-glocalist duality of China’s formatted TV programmes in the 2010s.

It is also worth mentioning that due to their wide popularity among Chinese TV audiences, Qu and Jia were later invited to perform a short comedic sketch entitled ‘Joy Street’ (Xíle Jie) on the 2015 Gala which aired on 19 February 2015. For this sketch, they performed another duet. Jia played an unattractive, poor ‘manly lady’ or ‘leftover’ single, which contrasted with Qu’s ‘goddess’ appearance and successful romantic life. They performed a song and dance, ‘Goddess and Manly Lady’ (Nūshēn he Nü Hanzī), the lyrics and comedic effect of which relied on exaggerating the difference between the two performers’ real-life situations. As soon as the sketch was aired, it provoked a backlash from online Chinese feminist groups. The Gala was criticised for its ‘women-hating’ tendencies and many audience members protested against watching the programme. Interestingly, the hardcore promotion of modern Chinese female gender ideals and stereotypes on the Gala was criticised by the audience, while the discursive construction of normative images of women through the gender parodies of the same pair of performers on YFSF was well received. This contrast reveals the effectiveness of YFSF’s parodic, re-normalising televisual-cultural technologies in carefully reconfiguring normative ideals of gender, sexuality and other sociocultural identities in a seemingly queer programme.

193 See, for example, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1305234
Conclusion

Making a queer turn in Chinese media and pop cultural studies

1. Queer TV in post-2000 China

Apparently, China’s entry into the new century appears to signal a relatively ‘liberating’, ‘progressive’ moment, especially for gender, sexual and cultural minorities. For the past two decades, its media industrialisation and cultural globalisation seem to have set the stage for a bourgeoning ‘queer pop’ cultural phenomenon. This period has seen a soaring proliferation of nonnormatively gendered and alternatively sexualised narratives, performances, cultural productions, artistic expressions, social relations and kinship systems in local media, creative industries and cultural spaces. Since the early 2000s, in spite of the persistent official media and online content crackdowns, digital production, cyber distribution technologies, social networking sites (both online and offline), and cellular phone applications available to self-identified Chinese-speaking LGBTQ groups have become increasingly accessible and diversified.\(^1\) In the parallel off-screen public space, China has also witnessed several waves of LGBTQ and feminist social-political movements in recent years.\(^2\) Some queer and feminist movements were significantly shaped by, or closely associated with, transnational queer and feminist currents, such as the recent #MeToo anti-sexual harassment movement at China-based universities.\(^3\)

Ironically, these queer-charged, feminist-energised transformations come about at the same time as China’s participation in global capitalism, its introduction of neoliberal and cosmopolitan policies, and the digitisation of its mass communication and public spaces. In particular, the rise of China’s queer pop can be largely accredited to its local media industries’ appropriation and synthesis of cyber celebrity and fan economies, media

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\(^2\) For details, see, Bao, *Queer Comrades*; and Engebretsen and Schroeder, *Queer/Tongzhi China*.

and digital convergence, and transcultural flows of media and queer knowledge within and across Chinese-speaking societies, Asia and the globe. This seemingly promising, increasingly LGBTQ- and feminist-friendly environment in the Chinese media and public cultures of the new millennium has also raised urgent questions at the intersection of global media studies and queer cultural studies.

For instance, in what ways has the convergence of global flows of Western-originated LGBTQ (and feminist) politics and entertainment information contributed to this queer pop boom? How and why can some forms of queer entertainment survive and flourish in today’s mainstream Chinese society, where LGBTQ and feminist identities and activisms remain demonised, discriminated against and censored? To what extent can queer media and pop culture speak to and reflect on the intersectional struggles of gender, sexual, ethnic, class-ed and other geocultural minorities within China’s nationalistic discourses of modernisation and globalisation? What are the connections and differences between media that feature cross-dressing, homosociality and androgyny, pop cultural productions for, by or about self-identified LGBTQ groups, and off-screen LGBTQ lives and realities in and outside of China?

While it is difficult to answer all these questions in a single thesis, my study has strived to respond to some of them by presenting a critical examination of the queer dimension of post-2000 China’s entertainment TV. TV in contemporary China is a major form of mass media, as well as a key propagandistic tool, with over 1.2 billion viewers in Mainland China. Since the mid-20th century, TV’s emergence and development in China have epitomised the transcultural circulation, consumption and diversification of both media information and gender (as well as sexual) minority knowledge. On the one hand, my thesis has adopted global TV scholar Albert Moran’s definition of ‘TV format’ as ‘an economic and cultural technology’ that partakes in local and global encounters and exchanges. I have paid special attention to China’s creative adaptations of televisual-cultural features of

certain genres and types of variety TV programmes in the new millennium. On the other hand, my research has built on the existing scholarship on Chinese-language queer media, such as the seminal works by Song Hwee Lim and Hongwei Bao, which delineates the cross-cultural traveling and mutations of the meaning of the Anglophone term, ‘queer’ in Chinese-speaking societies since the 1990s.\(^6\) By this means, I have advanced ‘queer’ as both a creative visual-cultural technique and a fecund analytical tool for Chinese media studies in a globalist, digital age. My exploration of the queer aspect of post-2000 China’s formatted TV in this thesis has explored the mutually enabling, shaping and complicating relationship of queer culture and global TV in the predominantly hetero-patriarchal-structured, mainstream Chinese society. Striving to push the limits of existing global TV studies and global queering theory from an anti-Western-centric perspective, my research has developed a productive theoretical framework——‘queer glocalisation’.

This framework draws on Roland Robertson’s concept of ‘glocalisation’\(^7\) to highlight the ‘glocalist’ feature of both TV and queer cultures in China. My analytical angle, thus, emphasises the ‘dual processes’ mobilised in China’s adaptation and reformulation of global TV formats. More specifically, I have argued that this duality of glocality evident in the intersected global TV and queer flows in China is a result of the continual conversations and persistent contestations among local, national and global cultures. It denotes a complicated, often self-contradictory practice characterised by multi-dimensional normalisation and marginalisation. Eventually, this China-specific glocal duality has led to the coexistence of queerly endorsed and normatively regulated elements in the local televisual representations of gender, sexuality, ethnic and other sociocultural minorities. Having paid special attention to this doubly enabling featuring, this thesis recognises and problematises the intertwined cultural processes through which China has been able to represent itself as a modern, globalised society through localising non-Chinese TV cultures, while marginalising, or even erasing, voices and

\(^6\) Lim, Celluloid Comrades, p. 12; and Bao, Queer Comrades, pp. 79-80.  
\(^7\) Robertson, ‘Globlisation or Glocalisation?’, pp. 33-52.
groups that do not contribute to the state’s global imagination, national projects and political ideologies.

Furthermore, critical examinations of the nuances of this duality of China’s glocalising of TV formats have helped to excavate and interrogate another worrying tendency rooted in the cultural translation, circulation and transformation of global queer identities, knowledge and politics in contemporary China, where the signs and performances of ‘queer’ in pop cultural spaces have gradually been depoliticised or largely repurposed by local capitalist media industries. Inspired by Sinophone scholar Shu-mei Shih’s call for a ‘conjunctive’ methodology in studies of marginalised groups, which combines theories and analytical tools that share similar conceptual logics to powerfully deconstruct various forms of normativity, I have combined the energy of both concepts (‘glocal’ and ‘queer’) to develop this approach of ‘queer glocalisation’. Throughout this thesis, I have employed a ‘queer-glocalist’ lens to study the mutually enabling, facilitating and transforming dynamics between queer cultures and TV flows in contemporary China. My approach attends to queer spaces and meanings, power hierarchies and sociocultural struggles made possible through China’s creative use and revision of global TV formats during its globalising and modernising processes.

In the introductory chapter and Chapter One, I have traced the genealogy of TV and queer cultures in a local context. In doing so, I have delineated the diverse ways contemporary China’s ‘national’ specificities, including public cultures, official propagandistic media, and the policies and regulatory practices of the party-state, have been continually negotiated with, and reflected on, in local, especially provincial TV station-broadcast or -produced, programmes that adapt and synthesise global TV formats. My historical review has showed that the Chinese TV industry’s adaptation, importation, copying, hybridising and revision of global TV formats in recent years have opened up spaces to produce, circulate and negotiate norm-defying images and meanings. Nevertheless, this queer-enabling feature of global TV formats

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has also been enacted and prescribed by context-specific gender and sexual histories and public cultures in the largely hetero-patriarchal mainstream society of modern and contemporary China.

For this reason, in Chapter One, I have also presented a review of both Chinese history of gender and sexuality (with a focus on womanhood) and Chinese public imaginaries (particularly literary and televisual representations) of women. This background analysis has demonstrated that female gender and sexuality has been a major site for social-political manipulation and ideological propaganda since the first decade of 20th century (the beginning of Chinese modernity). My analysis has illustrated that official cultural exploitations and distortions of female images and personas, underpinned by local patriarchal and heteronormative systems, have been in ongoing dialogue with global media, and LGBTQ and feminist information. Ironically, this normative rendition of female gender and sexuality has eventually contributed to the nonnormative, transgressive nature of contemporary China’s female representations. These Chinese-specific queer roots and routes of TV culture have been circulated in an age of globalisation and digitisation to form a new discursive televisual language for gender, sexual and cultural minorities to actively participate in, and negotiate with, local dominant gender/sex ideals and the government’s regulatory practices. This point has been elaborated in the main chapters (Chapters Two, Three and Four) of the thesis.

More specifically, using a ‘queer-glocalist’ optic, I have examined three, often queerly connotated, variety TV genres that incorporate global TV formats: talk shows, reality competitions and impersonation shows. Using specific case studies from each genre, which present images of transsexual and/or transgender women and queer performances involving cis females, I have discussed the various ways in which global circulations of TV formats and gender and/or sexual minority cultures have contributed to each other’s popularity and diversity in post-2000 China.
My analysis of the formatted talk show, *The Jinxing Show*, has illustrated how the show’s global televisual features contributed to the construction of the particular quasi-feminist celebrity persona of the show’s MTF transsexual host, Jin Xing. The show’s reconfiguration of Jin’s post-transition, traditionally defined heterosexual womanhood, which fits well with the gendered imagination and policies of the party-state, was also realised through Jin’s intentional promotion of Chinese-specific neoliberalism and cosmopolitanism. By this means, the show exemplified the ‘doubleness’ of queer glocalisation, which allows queer connotations, imaginations and images to flow through mainstream media spaces by incorporating them with the official ideals of female gender and sexuality.

While the queer flavour of *The Jinxing Show* can be partly attributed to the transsexuality of its host, the second case study in the thesis, which is devoted to the long-running reality singing contest *Super Voice Girl*, has revealed how the global televisual characteristics of reality TV simultaneously contribute to the formation of queer celebrity stardom (as well as encourage the rise of queer fandom) in China, yet help local gender-nonnormative celebrities to negate non-heterosexual identifications. My reading of the televisual-cultural evolution of *Super Voice Girl* over the past decade (from 2004 to 2016) has showed that the show’s borrowing and hybridising of global reality TV formats have facilitated the emergence and popularity of a Mainland Chinese-specific zhongxing (androgynous) celebrity culture. Different from the zhongxing pop culture that has emerged in other Chinese-speaking societies, this Mainland zhongxing trend, capitalised upon by local entertainment industries, has actively negotiated with the state’s feminist histories and official culture’s imaginings of female androgyny. In so doing, the zhongxing culture popularised by *Super Voice Girl* pointed to a new female gender identity culture which, to a certain degree, subverted traditional Chinese feminine ideals and legitimised the images of gender-nonnormative women in contemporary Mainland Chinese media. Yet, it achieved this goal by disassociating female androgyny from non-straight sexual orientations (e.g., lesbianism and female bisexuality). In this sense, this show exemplified a disappointing ‘queer sensationalist’ pop culture prevalent in contemporary
Chinese entertainment. It celebrated and commodified on-screen queer performances, yet distanced itself from, if not further stigmatised and ostracised, off-screen, real-life LGBTQ identities and groups.

My discussions in the first two chapters have focused on how global TV formats can serve as discursive visual-cultural technologies to zoom in on the queer aspects of celebrities in mainstream media. In the last case study, my exploration has moved forward to examine how China’s televisual representations of norm-transgressing gendered bodies and personas presented in interethnic and transcultural contexts served as tools to ‘re-normalise’ queer-loaded global TV formats and performances. My investigation of the celebrity impersonation show *Your Face Sounds Familiar* has illustrated that the show merged televisual-cultural characteristics drawn from traditional Chinese cross-dressing performing arts, contemporary East Asian androgynous, gender-crossing pop cultures, and Western drag cultures and media to present a televisual spectacle of gender parody. Nevertheless, a close reading of the star personas and staged performances of the two popular cis-female performers on the show has revealed that the queer aspects of this impersonation show were enlivened by challenging and parodying gender ideals within an intertwined racist, misogynistic and nationalistic framework, which eventually formed a Chinese-specific global queer gaze. Hence, these parodic queer images were also constitutive of the government’s promotion of a gender- and sexual-normative, essentialised ethnic-Chinese, modern womanhood in the off-screen world.

This thesis has presented the multiple ways in which global TV formats become an effective platform to produce and/or circulate queer meanings and images in the mainstream cultures and spaces of contemporary China. My research has also interrogated the various manners through which queer images, personas and desires can help invent and reformulate televisual characteristics and aesthetics. In addition, as I have highlighted throughout this study, during such dual processes, gender-nonnormative images and identities can paradoxically limit the transgressive potential of certain visual and public cultures, while queer-enabling TV formats can also guard the
dominant ideals of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class and nation-state. Since it is impossible for any research to be all-inclusive, I use the rest of this concluding chapter to discuss the contribution of my thesis, as well as potential research directions and promising topics, in Chinese (and global) queer TV studies and pop culture scholarship in general.

2. Queering post-2010 pop culture in and beyond China

Throughout this thesis, I have explored queer forms of desire and intimacy in post-2000 Chinese TV productions. However, these queer practices and representations have been discursively voiced by gender, sexual and sociocultural minorities as media producers, performers and/or consumers who do not necessarily self-identify as LGBTQ. In this sense, my study has further enriched existing English-language film and media scholarship’s re-evaluation of ‘queer’ in pop culture as a term referring to ‘any people not explicitly defining themselves in “traditional” heterosexual terms’.

As my case studies have showed, the televisual images and TV personalities who initiate or open up queer voicing possibilities might deliberately disidentify with gender and sexual minority groups and cultures. This finding has addressed the question of ‘where exactly queerness (as the status of being queer was designated) could be found’, which has been explored in Western queer scholarship since the 1990s.

In particular, some of my discussions on the formatted TV programmes substantiate Alexander Doty’s understanding of queerness as

particular practices and moments [that] … could materialize regardless of the self-termed identity of a viewer or the socially recognized gayness of the object viewed. Queerness was no longer experienced solely by self-declared queers watching ‘out’ texts, but was produced within and circulated by so-called ‘straight’ culture too.

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11 Paraphrased in ibid.; also see Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*. 
Moreover, in response to this seemingly self-contradictory, yet inherently constitutive relationship between queer and normative (or straight) cultures, my analysis has highlighted an ‘omnipresent’ Chinese queer cultural phenomenon. My case studies have revealed that queer desiring and imagining are, in fact, ubiquitous in various sectors of post-2010 globalised Chinese media and cultural industries. In addition, this queer pop has also been rooted in the historicity, contemporaneity and futurity of Chinese public cultures.

As José Esteban Muñoz remarks in his influential 2009 monograph, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*,

> Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalising rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there… Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing… Queer is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.

Following a similar logic, in his more recently published monograph *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China*, Chinese queer media scholar Hongwei Bao looks backwards to examine the queer inspirations that contemporary Chinese gay subjects have gained from Mainland China’s socialist past. Inspired by both works, my research on today’s queer TV culture has unveiled a permeating nonnormative, heteropatriarchal-challenging urge. This urge manifests in local queer pop culture’s persistent negotiation with and citation of both traditional Chinese gender and sexual ideals rooted in the ‘past’ (imperial, modern and socialist) and inter-Asian, global queer media flows perpetuated in postsocialist China’s present and future. However, due to the limited length and scope of this thesis, my research does not address some of the emerging queer-

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endorsed pop cultural phenomena of this kind. Without doubt, they are worth further exploration in the near future.

As I have demonstrated in the thesis, digital tools and social media have played key roles in the surge of queer pop in post-2010 China. In particular, online networking websites and applications have not only been used as convenient, accessible communicative venues for LGBTQ groups but have also been employed as subtle ways to produce and circulate queer productions while evading official censorship of homosexual content in the mass media. However, the government’s online censorial policies, as well as the self-censorship practices of online broadcasters, platforms and the general publics (both online and offline), do sometimes suppress homosexual content and thus limit the venues through which LGBTQ media can be circulated and consumed. One particular case is the queer reading, commenting and rewriting practices of online audiences, which have become more and more prevalent and participatory in nature. For instance, as I have mentioned in Chapter Three, some online TV viewers use the ‘bullet curtain’ (danmu) function of Internet-based TV programmes to express and communicate their queer interpretations of the images not only with other audiences but also with the celebrities who broadcast live. In addition, a growing number of Chinese cyber celebrities have gained fame for live-broadcasting their cross-gender performances in cyberspace. This interactive feature of online video and broadcasting cultures, which has been amplified in an increasingly digitised China in post-2010 years, is certainly queer-enabling. Nevertheless, the digital gap, playful tone and theatricality (often remaining hyperbolic, parodic, spectacular, transitory and detached from reality) of the practices, as well as the newly developed censorship systems practiced on online interactive platforms and regulating cyber celebrity cultures, also invite urgent and serious scholarly consideration. A careful reading of the queer

potential, nuances and problems of these participatory, real-time queer-natured cultural productions in Chinese cyberspace will help to interrogate whether and to what extent these emerging digital, creative cultures and practices manifest another form of queer sensationalism, or in what ways they offer alternative platforms and possibilities for performing queerness while mediating normative ideals and political-economic interests in a largely heteronormative public space.

At the same time, producers, celebrities and audiences of other forms of media have also been exploring and exploiting the queer potential of online social media for various purposes. Particularly, while the digital production, promotion and consumption of film has become common, the queer connotations and denotations in cinematic text, context and paratext facilitated by digitisation are also hard to ignore. Take, for example, one of the most successful film franchises in Mainland China, *Tiny Times* (Guo Jingming, He Li Chen Guang Media/EE-Media, China, 2013-2015) directed by the rumoured-to-be-gay director Guo Jingming. The film series has been ‘famous for its constant deployment and marketing of female and male homosociality and homosexuality to a predominantly female fan audience’.15 Before the debut of its fourth instalment in 2015, Guo posted a picture on his Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter) featuring the four main female leads kissing each other on the lips (fig. 5.1). The female star featured in the film, Yang Mi, has been married to a man for years and has given birth to a daughter. Yet, on her Weibo page Yang often draws attention to her ambiguous relationship with another Taiwanese actress featured in the film Bea Hayden Kuo, although often in a joking manner.

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Notably, while Kuo herself usually has a traditionally feminine appearance both on and off the screen, she presents a careful self-exhibition of queer sexuality combined with traditional femininity to popularise her celebrity persona and publicise media productions with other gender-nonnormative celebrities. Since 2012, certain lesbian ‘incidents’ involving Kuo have been widely circulated in Chinese cyberspace, especially among online Chinese-speaking lesbian communities. Some of Kuo’s Weibo followers have pointed out that almost a fifth of her online friends, as well as her assistants, are masculine lesbian celebrities (some of whom are publicly out) in China and Taiwan. In 2013, Kuo herself liked a Weibo post that speculated about her lesbian identity. In response, Kuo claimed that she ‘accidentally slipped and thus liked’ (shouhua dianzan) the post about her lesbian identity.\(^{16}\) However, in 2014, some netizens excavated Kuo’s intimate relationship with the Taiwanese zhongxing celebrity Jin Dai, who is a famous openly out, butch lesbian. The netizens found personal photographs of a private gathering of

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\(^{16}\) See https://www.douban.com/group/topic/41616730/.
Kuo with Dai and other Taiwanese lesbian-identified stars on Dai’s blog (fig. 5.2). The photo in which Kuo appeared featured three masculine and three feminine women. Some Weibo users commented that the gathering captured in the photos appeared to be three lesbian couples on a triple date. Following the wide circulation of similar lesbian ‘evidence’, topics related to Kuo’s lesbianism were often ranked hottest on Weibo’s hot search (resou) list. Kuo quickly and repeatedly denied these lesbian rumours during media interviews and in public announcements. Yet, interestingly, some high-profile Mainland Chinese actresses and actors, such as Wang Luodan and Li Yifeng, even liked and shared these news stories about Kuo’s potential lesbianism on their own Weibo pages, which furthered the netizens’ celebration of Kuo as a queer icon. This chain of queer tantalisation by film directors and producers, queer playing by film stars and celebrities, and queer readings by film audiences and fans epitomises the generative power of ‘queer’ in the media industries and cyberspace of a heteronormative society.

Figure 5.2: A screen capture of some Weibo users’ circulating of Kuo’s (lesbian) gathering photo

Another form of online queer circuit of culture is the production, translation, circulation and consumption of un-copyrighted LGBTQ media by netizens who are not media producers or industry professionals. A case in point is the large number of online fan-made or fan-subtitled homoerotic fictions and
comics that have either been imported or produced in China since the Internet gained popularity in the early 2000s. In addition, especially after 2010, social apps and networking websites, particularly those established by LGBTQ groups have also hosted online video sharing and streaming websites to circulate queer-themed film and TV shows produced by themselves.

For instance, as briefly mentioned in the concluding section of Chapter Three, the globally accessible Chinese lesbian dating app ‘the L’ was invented in 2012 and changed its name to ‘Rela’ in 2016 (fig. 5.3). In November 2016, it had around 5,000,000 users in total and 500,000 active daily users, 90% of whom were from Mainland China. Although the app was temporarily censored by the government in May 2017, it has been back online since early 2018. One of the most popular Chinese-language lesbian social networking apps, since September 2014, it has produced (or supported the production of) a number of online-distributed, small-budget, lesbian-themed TV shows, music videos and short films. These productions were later uploaded onto popular video sites, such as Rela’s official pages on YouTube and Facebook. Rela’s active users often participated in the productions as crew members. One notable example of such a production is the 2015 online Chinese lesbian sitcom, The L Bang! (Re La Bang; meaning ‘A Gang of Hot Lesbians’; fig. 5.4). This show incorporated many televisual and narrative characteristics of American sitcoms, such as Sex and the City (HBO, USA, 1998-2004) and Friends (NBC, USA, 1994-2004) and the American sensational lesbian TV drama, The L Word (Showtime, USA/Canada, 2004-

19 See https://www.upmedia.mg/news_info.php?SerialNo=18120
20 Yi, ‘Having 5 Million Lesbian Users’.
21 Rela often shares some of its indie productions on the popular Chinese video website, Youku.com. Yet, due to online media censorship, these videos were constantly removed from the Chinese site for containing inappropriate content. For instance, the introductory information of its TV show, The L Bang! can still be seen on Youku.com from here: https://list.youku.com/show/id_z70e59d8a661c11e5b692.html. Yet, the videos for the full series have been deleted. The official webpages of Rela on YouTube is https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDUvCXeUuI0xGvYwFp3Mg, which obtained more than 116,000 subscribers till November 2018. Its Facebook page is https://www.facebook.com/Relaapp/, which had over 107,000 followers by November 2018. On its facebook page, it also alleged that it has more than 7,000,000 (mostly Chinese-speaking) lesbian users all over the world.
Moreover, The L Bang! incorporated online celebrity, fan-voting and star-selecting cultures. Its main actresses, for instance, were all active celebrity users of Rela, who were voted by other users to play leading roles in the show. This cross-media LGBTQ production and consumption, as well as the glocalist processes of LGBTQ media formats, online participatory cultures and media convergence, are promising topics for future research. Critical analyses of this queer glocalisation of American sitcoms and lesbian dramas in the production of online Chinese lesbian TV series, especially the ones unravelling how Western televisual styles and devices regarding lesbian (or feminist/post-feminist) gender and sexuality and same-sex intimacies are adapted and reformulated in the Mainland Chinese context, will help to testify my thesis of the duality of queer gloclality. In addition, research on the collaboration of LGBTQ social networking apps and video-streaming sites in post-2010 China for the production, distribution and consumption of queer media that target Chinese-speaking LGBTQ audiences will further supplement and complicate my findings on the queer glocalisation of Chinese variety TV programmes broadcast in mainstream media spaces and accessible to the general public.

Figure 5.3: An Apple Store screen capture of the Chinese lesbian dating app Rela, which describes itself as ‘a diverse female community online’ (duoyuan nüxing shequ).
In addition, the intersectionality of nonnormative gender, sexual, class-ed and ethnic identities in today’s Chinese queer pop is a potentially enormous topic of study. China’s queering and queered public imaginaries of male gender and sexuality, especially those featuring lower-class male femininity and cross-racial male homoeroticism, would certainly be worth lengthy exploration. This research direction helps to interrogate the interconnections between nationhood, power and (male) masculinity by looking at the intersected Mainland Chinese-specific ideals of male gender, sexuality and social status promoted in the state’s cultural construction of contemporary China as a Han-culture-dominated, masculinine, heterosexual and thus economically and politically powerful country on the global stage.

Furthermore, the central role of non-Mandarin linguistic variances and minority ethnic identities in this burgeoning queer media and pop culture in post-2010 China should not be overlooked. For instance, as discussed in Chapter Four, China studies scholars, such as Dru C. Gladney, have pointed out that CCTV (state-owned TV station) variety programme *Spring Festival Gala* has always represented non-Han Chinese (ethnic minorities with PRC nationality) people as ethnic others who pay tribute to a self-imagined Han
culture-centred nation. Yet, notably, in recent years, a growing number of provincial station-produced variety TV programmes adapted from South Korean or Western global formats feature ethnic minorities from exoticised regions in and outside of China, such as Uyghur actresses and rappers, multi-racial Chinese-speaking celebrities, and Taiwan indigenous singers. In particular, some of the non-Han-Chinese female celebrities have been framed as a combination of ‘manly lady’ and ‘goddess’ for their gendered looks, personas and performances which do not correspond with traditional (Han-)Chinese definitions of female beauty. This cultural trend that fetishises non-Han-Chinese people, especially women, in a glocalist televisual culture also raises questions about whether the mismatches between gender and sexual ideals caused by linguistic and ethnic differences can inadvertently enable an interethnic ‘drag’——a gendered form of mimicry in Mainland Chinese-specific colonialist, semi-colonialist or postcolonialist contexts.

Finally, these exciting, yet severely underexplored, if not unexamined, research topics and directions call for a fruitful research project that can ‘question, problematize, and struggle with simple configurations of media globalization, cultural imperialism, national television, audience reception, indigenous production, televisual flow, and industrial practices in relation to the worldwide circulation of televisual content’ (emphasis in original) and digital technologies.

In his ground-breaking 2010 monograph Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization, inter-Asian cultural studies scholar Kuan-hsing Chen took his cue from Japanese thinker Takeuchi Yoshimi’s idea of ‘Asia as method’ in the 1960s. In turn, Chen argues that the conceptualisation of Asia can be

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used as a critical strategy to deimperialise and decolonise cultures, identities and geo-locales affiliated with Asianness from Western hegemony, especially through critical examinations of the interconnections between the histories, politics and identities of diverse Asian societies. His theoretical method situates Asia at the centre of cultural theories, which ultimately subverts the hegemonic convention that Asia is solely a ‘product of westernization’, or a place at the margin of Western cultural studies that provides case studies to testify to the validity of theoretical frameworks originated from the West.

Also, to decentre, and dispute the universalism of, Western TV studies scholarship from a different angle, US-based media scholars Lisa Parks and Shanti Kumar have emphasised in their 2003 coedited volume, Planet TV: A Global Television Reader, that

Global television should not be conceptualized as something ‘out there’ to be explored and studied, something Other that is separate from us. Rather, it is part of the very social fabric that gives shape to us as individual subjects and imagined communities. ... As we study global television we must recognize that no matter where we live in the world we are implicated within it. We are all shaped in one way or another by the social, economic, and cultural relations that the medium of television has historically worked to structure and reproduce. If we see ourselves as part of global television rather than distinct from it, perhaps we will become more active in struggling over the uses of the medium and its global futures. [emphasis in original]

Responding to these calls for global media and cultural studies, my research has endeavoured to merge the denaturalising, deconstructive power of both global circulations of queer and TV cultures in today’s non-Western sociocultural environments. By dismantling binarist categories, such as globality and locality, East and West, regionality and nationality, and hetero- and homo-sexuality, my study has imagined and hopefully initiated an ambitious field of media research: global queer TV studies in a digital age.

Within this field, with the help of the ‘queer-glocalist’ framework as a critical approach, I hope that this study has powerfully intervened in the prevailing trend, exemplified in the earlier generation of global gay/queering studies (see my discussions in the introductory chapter on Dennis Altman’s theory), to examine non-Anglophone, especially Asian, queer politics and media cultures through a ‘first-world’ paradigm. Ultimately, this thesis has paved a critical way for future anti-hegemonic, de-essentialist understandings of the perils and merits of queer media across the globe.
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