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From ‘Kill This Love’ to ‘Cue *Ji*’s Love’: The Convergence of Queer, Feminist and Global TV Cultures in China

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Abstract

This research looks at women-centred Chinese competition-style programmes that are adapted from foreign TV formats and synthesise transnational televisual elements, idol cultures and gendered aesthetics. With particular attention to imaginaries of women with nonnormative gender and sexual identities, I expound how and why representations of female gender and sexuality on Chinese TV are fashioned by the intersected discourses on China’s TV and cultural globalisations and digitisation, the party-state’s manipulations and regulations of feminism, androgyny and homoeroticism, and the entertainment industry’s capitalisation of queer women’s stardom and fandom. My analysis reveals that the emergence, survival and endurance of queer women on Chinese TV has coincided with China’s appropriations of both global formats and twenty-first-century idol girl group cultures. Through examining some key moments in popular idol group-cultivating shows produced in 2020 and 2021, I capture a multilevel, ambivalent queer convergence that transforms these televisual stages into queer-charging venues through which queer imaginaries of womanhood have actively incorporated local situations and transcultural televisual, gender and sexual knowledge to bypass, compromise with – and even partly connive with – the government’s ideological and moral controls.

Keywords

Chinese TV, Girl Group, Global TV, Queer Convergence, TV Format, Womanhood

In 2020, the unprecedented success of ‘idol-cultivating’ (*ouxiang yangcheng*) talent competitions and celebrity-participation reality programmes marked the emergence of the Chinese TV industry as a global queer media empire. Notable examples include the girl band training shows *Youth With You 2* (*YWY2*; iQiyi), involving mostly young apprentices, and *Sisters Who Make Waves* (*SWMW*; Mango TV), which features mature celebrities. Both shows explicitly or implicitly promoted the various forms of female masculinity and queer sexuality of their participants and targeted predominately female-identifying audiences and fans. This China-originated queer women-focused televisual spectacle followed the rise and fall of Boys’ Love (BL; also known as *danmei*), one of the most internationally influential Chinese TV genres in the 2010s that centres around male effeminacy and same-sex intimacies. Representations of queer women have been most visible in Chinese reality competition shows that are adapted from foreign formats and genres. These images of queer women differ significantly from most Covid-19-themed, pseudo-feminist Chinese TV series. Such series tend to romanticise ‘real’ Chinese suffering, reimagining the women who participated in the fight against Covid-19 as a revised version of state-endorsed socialist heroines, embodying features of traditionally defined heterosexual femininity and patriarchal-natured self-sacrificing attitudes (Zhou and Xie 2022: 372). Looking at programmes with focuses on ‘idol-manufacturing’ (*ouxiang zhizao*) and ‘idol-cultivating’, this article explores how nonnormative representations of female gender and sexuality on Chinese TV are contoured by the intersected discourses on China’s TV and cultural globalisations and digitisation, the party-state’s manipulations and regulations of feminism, androgyny and homoeroticism, and the entertainment industry’s capitalisation of queer women’s stardom and fandom.

I conceive of ‘queer’ as a creative, performative method of achieving strategic negotiations with Chinese gender and sexual conventions, media censorship, heteropatriarchal

ideologies and transcultural flows of feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) knowledge, as well as with global capitalism. The potential of queerness for negotiation and disruption might be particularly effective within highly heterosexist-patriarchal sociocultural environments. Drawing on existing scholarship on one of the major televisual-cultural technologies developed in contemporary global media industries – the ‘TV format’ (Moran 1998) – I begin my discussion with a brief (gendered) history of global TV format adaptations in contemporary China and demonstrate that processes of format adaptation and revision have great potential for mediating and fusing transcultural knowledge of gender and sexuality. The emergence of queer women on Chinese TV has coincided with China’s appropriation of global TV formats and twenty-first-century idol girl group cultures, and is concurrent with the government’s constant manipulation of feminist thoughts and figures to remedy the country’s global image and soothe public anxieties over Chinese society’s increasing heterosexism.

Identifying a transition from the manufacturing of individual stars to the ‘cultivating’ of idol groups on Chinese TV since the late 2010s, I also discuss the ‘inter-Asian referencing’ essence of Chinese idol girl group culture, which has added another queer layer to the idol-cultivating TV format. While the term ‘inter-Asian referencing’ has been identified as a key de-Western-centric strategy for ‘innovative knowledge production through reciprocal learning from other Asian experiences’ in Asian pop culture studies (Iwabuchi 2014: 47), it has been recognised as a powerful self-fashioning practice facilitated by inter-Asian cultural flows and human mobilities during queer Asian subject formation and meaning-making processes, which ‘use Asia and not the West as anchoring points’ (Yue 2017: 21). Meanwhile, research has conceptualised the transculturation of certain Asian pop cultures, such as K-pop, as an (inter)subjective process during which some pop cultural trends become unbounded by any geopolitical specificities and thus are globally mobile and adaptable (Iwabuchi 2014; Jung

2011). Yet, as my research demonstrates, both girl group and TV format cultures, rather than inherently malleable and permeable across geocultural boundaries, are characterised, driven and sustained by their queer potentiality to negotiate an enduring, lucrative space within commercial media industries and heteronormative societies through drawing connections between ‘local’ and ‘non-local’ particulars.

Furthermore, I present critical readings of some key moments of *YWY2*, *SMMW* and *Youth With You 3* (iQiyi; *YWY3*), all of which appropriated the South Korean idol group-cultivating formats (such as those of the reality shows *Idol Producer* and *Produce 101*) and reconfigured them to present various queer personas. My analyses identify an intricate queer-charging Chinese TV screen in a globalist, digital era saturated with images of queer girls and women and the queer fandoms orbiting them, which I term as a women-centred ‘queer convergence’. While some researchers have found queer convergence a useful framework to interrogate technological determinism in the studies of online or transnational fan communities (Kang 2015; Rush 2022), I deploy it to delimit and expound the conundrum in which old and new forms of media, information, technology and imaginary pertinent to queer girlhood and womanhood encounter, merge and rival or collaborate with each other on local, transcultural and global scales on contemporary Chinese TV. My examination captures the emerging scenario in the Chinese TV industry of the early 2020s that continues to not only re-orient and restructure flows and hierarchies of global queer media and knowledge but also centre China as a global queer media hub: that is, although the programmes and formats scrutinised in this article facilitate the Chinese commercial media industry’s practising of queerbaiting strategies and contribute to the state’s abuse of feminist images for political propaganda, they also invoke and evoke a diversity of women’s desiring voices, and forcefully carve out stimulating queer-cum-feminist media and communicative spaces for building alliances between feminist and LGBT communities.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that in contrast to the recent official curtailment of male androgyny and homoeroticism in Chinese TV and idol industries (which I parody with the name *Kill This Love* after the title of a K-pop song), queer televisual imaginaries of female gender and sexuality have survived, thrived and diversified (especially in terms of age, gender and sex roles). By carefully working within state-sanctioned feminist, capitalist and globalist logics, these queer imaginaries have actively incorporated local women's situations and transcultural televisual, gender and sexual knowledge to bypass, compromise with – and even partly connive with – the government's ideological and moral controls.

'Engendering' Global TV Formats in China

Formats 'are a relatively recent development in international television industry that has led to both a formalisation and a regulation of the movement of program ideas from one place to another' (Moran 1998: 23). 'Domesticating' TV formats has been a crucial strategy in contemporary China's media and cultural globalising processes. The state-backed decentralisation and commercialisation of media and cultural markets in the economic reform era that began in 1978 gave rise to the Chinese TV industry's employment of foreign formats in the late 1990s (Fung and Zhang 2011; Keane and Zhang 2017; Yang 2014). The entertainment nature, economic productivity and cultural adaptability of TV formats enable the swift (re)production of shows that are well-suited to China's social-political systems and its national development strategies (Sun and Zhao 2015).

China has experienced several waves of TV format importation in the twenty-first century (Keane 2015). In the first phase, elements of European and American shows were (often illegally) copied, culminating in the unprecedented nationwide success of the female-only reality singing competition, *Super Voice Girls* (SVG; Hunan TV, 2004–2006, 2009, 2011, 2016), which was heavily based on the British show, *Pop Idol* (ITV, 2001–2003).

While the huge success of *SVG*-style ‘idol-manufacturing’ shows relied heavily on the deliberate exploitation of audience participation and fans’ affective labour (Yang 2014), such behaviour could also inspire ‘a form of citizen participation that threaten[s] an authoritarian government’ (McMurria 2009: 197). Together with the emphasis on individualism, grassroots empowerment and the subversion of traditional standards of beauty and social hierarchies, the shows could be seen to represent a contradiction to the party-state’s governing principles. Consequently, some of these formatted shows with promising ‘democratising’ power soon faced accusations from the government of ‘cheap content and vulgar repertoire’ (Yang 2014: 521) and became subject to criticism or cancellation or were forced to rectify their central themes.

Subsequently, the legal licensing and importing of East Asian formats, especially from South Korea (Keane and Zhang 2017: 635), characterised the second phase of China’s TV format adaptations. In parallel with the resurgence of neo-Confucianism and China’s continued enforcement of its heteropatriarchal policies on family planning after 2010 (Zhou 2016), the period saw the proliferation of heterosexual family-focused reality programmes that sought to refashion conventional East Asian values of family, marriage and gender in creative, appealing ways (Keane and Zhang 2017).

Despite the intermittent top-down constraining and banning of TV programmes and formats (Yang 2014), the late 2010s and early 2020s have seen a further period of TV format innovation marked by the enormous popularity of singing or dancing reality competition shows, such as *The Rap of China* (iQiyi, 2017–2020), *Produce 101* (Tencent, 2018–2019) and *Street Dance of China* (Youku, 2018–), as well as comedy-styled talk shows such as *Rock & Roast* (Tencent, 2017–). On the one hand, these shows merge pan-East Asian traditional values and foreign pop cultural styles, such as the gendered aesthetics and training procedures of K-pop music groups and idol industries, Japanese *kawaii* and cosplay elements, and

Western rap and street dance trends and comedy conventions. On the other hand, they bring together production crews, celebrity judges, mentors, coaches, trainees and participants from different parts of the world to form a multidimensional ‘globalised’ televisual stage.

The articulation of the ‘global’ in these shows diverges from those entertainment TV programmes that deploy ethnic-minority and foreign ‘performances of Chineseness to present to domestic audiences the image of a powerful ... Chinese nation’ (Gorfinkel and Chubb 2014: 123). They also differ from the cross-racial, gendered mechanics of 1990s Chinese soap operas that hyper-eroticised Caucasian women who are ‘tamed’ by Chinese men in transnational romance narratives in order to signify China as ‘masculine and desirable’ on a global scale (Erwin 1999: 238). Instead, they domesticate cosmopolitanism by reconfiguring seemingly ‘foreign’ televisual-cultural elements with dominant Chinese sociocultural particulars while simultaneously providing Chinese audiences with a cultural confidence through the mediation of an image of China as a ‘strong nation’ (*qiangguo*) and an emerging global dream factory appealing to extraordinary talents abroad. As such, these shows deftly contribute to the global cultural presence and status of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) by grabbing the attention (as well as accumulating the affective investment) of foreign media, entertainment conglomerates, audiences and fans, and by conferring prominence on those non-PRC talents, professionals, public figures and celebrities who are actively involved in the Chinese entertainment industries. This dual function of reviving the government’s ‘please come in’ (*qing jinlai*) strategy of inviting transnational business ventures and importing foreign media demonstrates the central position of TV formats in the party-state’s local, cross-geocultural and global approaches to moral, ideological and cultural manipulations and expansion, while also simultaneously endorsing the ‘going out’ (*zou chuqu*) policy of increasing the PRC’s global cultural influences through the media, industrial, cultural and economic-political sectors (see also, Keane 2019; Zhu 2020).

Following the rapid development in the past decade of online streaming sites, social media and digital media companies, the Chinese TV industry has undergone a ‘digital turn’ (Bai 2020; Keane 2019; Zhu 2020). Most recently-formatted shows are now broadcast and/or produced by China-based video-streaming sites. Some are also dubbed into English and distributed through YouTube, rendering them accessible to worldwide audiences. As Michael Keane has astutely noted, ‘digital platforms are a new vanguard of Chinese “cultural soft power,” both domestically and internationally’ (2019: 245). This digitisation of Chinese formatted TV, as part of the government’s political project of ‘national rejuvenation’ under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, has further contributed to both ‘exerting China’s influence globally and exercising political and ideological control domestically’ (Zhu 2020: 443).

Some studies on the Chinese adaptation of Western and East Asian formats have demonstrated that the carefully revised content and visuality in the local versions can effectively reify the official political ideologies on patriarchy, nationalism and neoliberalism, while also purging taboo topics pertinent to homosexuality, teenage violence and racial and class struggles found in the original productions (Fung and Zhang 2011; Song 2022; Yang 2014). Furthermore, an expanding body of research understands the adapted TV shows as fertile platforms for voicing Chinese-specific feminist expressions in parodic, compromising ways (Zhu 2021), or for promoting ethno-nationalistic sentiments and political propaganda through their representations of racial, national, musical and linguistic diversities (Cheung 2017; Jiang and Gonzalez 2021). Nevertheless, these dialogues fail to account for the potential of the transculturation of global TV formats to inspire, mediate, diversify and disseminate queer women’s imaginaries in public, commercialised Chinese spaces.

The Coequality of TV Formats and Queer Women’s Media Presence in China

Chris Berry (2007) has observed that the trans-Asian popularity of BL since the 1990s has coincided with the public appearance of gay culture in East Asia. In a similar vein, I suggest that the emergence and wide celebration of female androgyny and homoeroticism in twenty-first-century Chinese televisual and public spaces is contemporaneous with the transformation in China's transcultural borrowing, modification and hybridisation of the formats discussed above, and that this is not a coincidence.

A classic example is the unforeseen triumph of Li Yuchun, one of China's first high-profile tomboyish (referring to young, masculine women) idols, who rose to stardom in the 2005 season of *SVG*. A large body of research has considered her rise to fame to be a manifestation of various transcultural encounters and syntheses of local, inter-Asian and global gender, sexual and media knowledge (Hu 2019; Li 2015; Xiao 2020). However, this body of research has neglected the particular hybrid and later digitised dimensions of the show's format that visual-culturally cite, publicly envisage and amplify local and transculturally circulated aesthetics and histories of queer women.

Throughout the years of its broadcast, *SVG*'s constantly revised format fused televisual elements from Euro-American surveillance and competition programmes to create a self-contained, female-only setting. Within this same-sex televisual milieu, the participants were required to live together for months in a camp-like location and undergo training and evaluation. During the various intense elimination rounds, some participants became close friends and formed tight emotional bonds, which is especially evident in the group training and performance segments of the show. Because there can be only one national winner, the participants had to battle with, and eventually eliminate, close friends on stage. The show's hybrid format vividly captured these 'quasi-real' daily challenges and struggles and also sentimentalised the training and competition processes into a melodramatic imaginary of female friendship (homosociality), independence, self-growth and professional success.

Meanwhile, an enduring ‘schoolgirl’ trope in the format’s televisual-cultural designs also emerged whereby participants were often required to wear girly, school-style uniforms. However, some of the participants were not youthful ‘super girls’ at the time of their involvement, but rather grown women who were thus categorised by mainstream Chinese culture as mature adults. This visual reification of the ‘schoolgirl’ imaginary may have resulted from a pervasive pan-East Asian heteropatriarchal male gaze that fetishises women as girlish, youthful and, contradictorily, both sexually innocent and attractive (*youchun youyu*; 又纯又欲). Yet, some scholars also find that a tradition of the ‘schoolgirl’ trope has existed in various manifestations in Sinophone visual and literary imaginaries of queer women since the late nineteenth century (Martin 2010, 2016). The preponderance of Chinese ‘schoolgirl’ romance narratives has close links with the inter-Asian rendition and circulation of European sexological knowledge on homosexuality, as well as with the growth in indigenous modern knowledge of same-sex intimacies in different parts of East Asia, which can be traced back to the 1920s (Martin 2016). Moreover, in East Asian mainstream societies and media, same-sex desire between schoolgirls has long been trivialised as something harmless, playful, transient and thus non-threatening to the heterosexual-dominated adult society (Choi 2016: 182; Martin 2010). Paradoxically, this trivialisation renders the trope morally and politically innocuous, while imbuing it with an immense power to serve as an effective queer catalyst for presenting and stimulating female same-sex fantasies.

The success of this queer-driven global TV format has also coevolved with the transnational popularisation of nonnormatively-gendered aesthetics of J-pop and K-pop in the past two decades (Hong 2021b; Martin 2016); for instance, inter-Asian, cross-media adaptations of the Japanese comic *Boys’ Over Flowers*, which contributed to the trending of East Asian ‘flower-like’ androgynous male idol culture and the ‘little fresh meat’ (*xiaoxianrou*) aesthetics of young, beautiful, effeminate men in China (Song 2022). Hunan

TV, the producer of *SVG* and the two Chinese versions of *Boys' Over Flowers* (broadcast as *Meteor Garden* in China) in 2001 and 2018, along with other Chinese provincial TV stations, has been actively appropriating the power of LGBT icons featured in foreign singing competition shows, dramas and movies to increase profits and grab attention. This queer experiment reached its peak in 2016 when Hunan TV began placing a large number of tomboyish participants in *SVG*, spotlighting their intimacies with other, more feminine participants. Some of these participants were already long-established Chinese lesbian social media icons and had even been featured in advertisements for the well-known lesbian social networking app The L. The fleeting, yet intense, 'schoolgirl-only' queer fantasies promoted by the show helped to dramatise and socioculturally legitimise the participants' queerness.

As the 2016 season of *SVG* aired, the convergence of the Chinese TV and online video-streaming industries accelerated (Fung 2019). The platformisation of *SVG* in 2016 (including special live-streamed, interactive sections with audiences and fans) further opened up promising spaces for performing and desiring female homoeroticism. During the live interaction, 'commentary sharing' and 'bullet-screen' (*danmu*) functions allowed fans to share their queer fantasies about participants by posting comments that appeared on screen like running subtitles. Encouraged by the fans' queer readings, the participants also actively performed intimate gestures with each other. The queer-natured live-streaming segment of the show powerfully synchronised and synthesised the representational and interpretive techniques of queerbaiting (by the show's producers), fan service (by the participants) and queer readings (by the fans) to manipulate homoerotic connotations, denotations, subtexts and contexts. These deployments of digital media to engage fans and marketise the show are not foreign to the K-pop idol and music-band manufacturing industry (Jung and Hirata 2012). As discussed in the next section, China's adaptation and televisualisation of East Asian idol

group cultures adds a further complication of this queer women-focused TV format's transcultural, digital and interactive aspects.

The Queer Cultivation of Idol Girl Groups on Chinese TV

The online streaming in 2018 of the girl band-cultivating show *Produce 101* (adapted from a Korean TV format featuring an idol traineeship prevalent in J-pop and K-pop) represented the nexus of Chinese idol girl group and TV format cultures. Its format, also known as 'idol nurturing', visualises the painstaking processes of selecting and training novices, and then gradually transforming them into stars. The format not only 'cultivates' the emotional labour of its audiences, who witness and are actively engaged in the development of these trainees (thereby encouraging an emotional closeness between idols and fans), but also 'nurtures' the televised relations and emotional attachment of the group members to each other (thus strengthening the psychological bonds between group members).

The roots of China's girl group-cultivating culture can be traced to the appearance of the Beijing-based girl group *Qingchun Meishaonv* (Young Beautiful Girls) in 1995. In 2009, SM Entertainment in South Korea launched its new girl group f(x), promoting tomboyish Taiwanese American member Amber Liu, whose persona was considered an inter-Asian referencing of *SVG* celebrity Li Yuchun's 'pan-Asian' cool androgyny (Yu and Yue 2008: 126). The manufacturing of girl groups entails a wider range of intimate same-sex contexts than for individual girl idols in that it offers more possibilities for a feminist negotiation and queer reworking of the group members' unconventional personas. The heightened public interest aroused by Amber's cosmopolitan, 'fashion-based' gender ambiguity has inspired not only inter-Asian queer women's aesthetics but also Asian entertainment industries' manufacturing and marketisation of girl groups (Laurie 2016: 224; Yue 2011). In February 2011, the Taiwan-based girl group Misster, comprising five tomboyish girls, was launched by

the Lady Emperor (*nvdi*) agency. Proclaiming itself to be anti-gender binarism, several members of Misster later came out publicly in Taiwan as lesbian or transgender. In August 2011, Misster was featured in the popular Chinese talk show, *Day Day Up* produced by Hunan TV.

In the 2010s, China experimented with manufacturing local idol girl groups that were characterised by inter-Asian queer aesthetics and marketing strategies. In 2012, the most transnationally successful of these, the Shanghai-based all-girl group SNH48, was formed, based largely on the prominent Japanese girl group AKB48, established in 2005. Research has been conducted comparing the different methods by which the two groups transculturally mediate their own geocultural identities and artfully negotiate the long-standing political tensions between China and Japan (Jiang 2020; Tu and Xie 2022). However, SNH48's adoption of AKB48's queer strategies on stage and in public has been overlooked. Such practices include intimately dancing together, hugging and kissing each other, and sharing ambiguous lesbian-connotated posts on social media with a large number of fan followers, all of which invite queer readings from audiences. Some SNH48 members were rumoured to be dating each other during their trainee period, and in November 2021 two of them came out publicly but also voluntarily retreated from the group.¹

There were also some failed attempts in China: girl duo V2, which comprised two tomboyish participants from *SVG*, was launched in 2010; in 2016 the girl group-cultivating show *LadyBees*, produced by Zhejiang TV, gave rise to a girl band of the same name fronted by tomboyish idol Liu Yuxin; and, in 2017, the girl group FFC-Acrush, comprising five visibly masculine young women, was formed in imitation of Misster. All of these groups appropriated interwoven narratives of pan-East Asian gendered aesthetics (particularly East Asian male androgyny), youth culture, girl power and Chinese-specific feminism to publicise

¹ See https://www.sohu.com/a/498842258_120634071

and justify their queer stardom and fandom, but they experienced only short-lived popularity and disbanded quickly.

Regardless, the industry's interest in televising girl group cultivation has certainly boosted Chinese queer girl band culture, in marked contrast to recent government bans on images of male androgyny and homoeroticism in BL dramas, and the related craze for effeminate male celebrities.² Ironically, most of these celebrities rose to fame as inter-Asian boy band members or by playing male protagonists in popular BL dramas. This contradictory situation can be illustrated by the case of the Chinese-Canadian male idol, Kris Wu (Wu Yifan).

Wu was trained and popularised as an androgynous idol in the famous South Korean boy band EXO, and once featured as a celebrity judge on the adapted show *Rap of China*. In 2016, thanks to his widespread popularity in East Asia, he was invited to serve as a representative of the show *SVG*, signifying 'androgyny' as a trendy inter-Asian fashion and beauty standard. For years, both on and off the TV screen, Wu had been tantalising his queer fans (composed mostly of young women and gay men) with his inter-Asian male androgyny, cosmopolitanism and his bittersweet relationships with other androgynous Chinese members of EXO, such as Lu Han, Zhang Yixing and Huang Zitao. In the most recent wave of China's media and cyber regulatory campaigns that began in 2018, the effeminacy of these boy band members was denounced by the government as promoting a derogatorily understood 'sissiness' (*niangpao*), while BL fans were accused of disseminating pornographic information, instigating conflict and unrest in public spaces, manipulating celebrity-fan relationships for illegal economic ends or inciting hate speech (Song 2022). Nevertheless, the ethos underpinning these crackdowns remains the party-state's heteropatriarchal doctrine,

² From 2016, some web dramas featuring transgender and gay romances have been banned or forced to rectify their content; official criticism of male effeminacy in China's celebrity industry started in 2018.

which persistently links Chinese men's (hyper)masculinity and (hetero)sexual power to its national vitality (Song 2022). In July 2021, Wu was detained on charges of seducing, drugging and raping underage female fans. Wu's public presence since then has been censored within the industry and in Chinese cyberspace in a move that was widely believed to be a victory for China's #MeToo movement.

Intriguingly, this censoring of male androgyny, paralleled with the continued televisual commercialisation of norm-defying women that has been tolerated or even eulogised by the party-state, also reflects a subtle form of China's national-political directives characterised by conflicting interests of heteronormativity, neo-Confucianism-coated patriarchy and state feminism. It associates male effeminacy with gayness (as well as sexually transmitted diseases and impotency), while attributing, either intentionally or reluctantly, female androgyny and singledom to feminist expressions and women's emancipation that can contribute to PRC's self-imaginary as a progressive, highly modernised nation-state supportive of women's rights and empowerment.

Notably, since the beginning of China's self-modernising process and the emergence of Chinese feminist movements in the first decade of twentieth's century, women's bodies and desires – even nonnormative ones – have always played a major role in various national-ideological-political projects and manipulated by and for the state's self-imagery (Barlow 2004; Liu, Karl and Ko 2013). One classic example is the promotion of female androgyny during the socialist era, which was part of the official Maoist women's liberation project, yet in fact forcibly de-feminised women in public spaces. In the post-Mao years, there has been a hyperfeminisation of women in public and pop cultures that signifies a radical break from previous Maoist politics and a 'resurging discourse of liberal individualism' (Xiao 2014: 16) in the official discourses. Yet, the social-political pressure on young women to get married and give birth through media propaganda of officially-created or -endorsed stigmatising

discourses, such as the derogatory terms ‘leftover women’ (*shengnv*; women who are over 27 years old and remain single) and ‘manly women’ (*nv hanzi*; women who are outspoken, independent and both mentally and physically strong), has also become more prominent since the late 2000s. In response to the rising critique of these official misogynistic ideologies from Chinese feminist activists, transnational feminist organisations and foreign media outlets, state feminism represented by the government-sponsored All-China Women’s Federation criticised and banned the use of some neologisms depreciating women’s value in the late 2010s. Nevertheless, while state feminism has attempted to promote female masculinity as a Chinese-specific feminist expression in order to frame China as a country in favour of gender equality and diversity, the maligning representations of unmarried, divorced, senior or masculine women and official condemnation of feminist and queer movements have remained prevalent in Chinese public and pop cultural discourses. These incongruous media, social and political cultures might have further provoked the yearning of Chinese audiences and feminist and queer women communities for diverse images and role models of nonnormative women.

Chinese idol girl group cultures in the early 2020s have become a battlefield for these conflicting interests and power struggles centring around imaginaries of girlhood and womanhood. In response to the ‘sissiphobic’ crackdowns both in China’s male idol and TV industries and along with rising local and transnational feminist movements, another wave of queer women-centred formatted TV culture has emerged, as epitomised by the extraordinary success of *YWY2* and *SMMW*.

***Kill This Love* or ‘Cue Ji’s Love’ in the Early 2020s**

First broadcast on 12 March 2020, the objective of *YWY2* is to form a girl band by selecting nine members from 109 trainees after four months of training and competition. *YWY2*’s format features an intense mentorship system that encourages trainees to closely interact with

and learn from the celebrity judges and coaches. Three of the four mentors are music group idols from different parts of the world who have been famous for their gender-nonnormative personas. In particular, the dance mentor Lisa is an ethnic Thai member of the most prominent K-pop girl band in history, Blackpink, and the vocal mentor Ella (Chen Chia-hwa), based in Taiwan, is a member of the influential and long-established Sinophone girl group S.H.E., which debuted two decades ago. Both are known for their embodiment of female androgyny and their successful reworkings of rumours of lesbianism as a voicing of East Asian popular feminism and girl power. The design of *YWY2* foregrounds the queer appeal of these two female mentors and perpetuates a queer-negotiating space for the trainees to cultivate their queer charm as something transculturally shared, celebrated and normal, thus projecting commercially successful and socio-politically open-minded images of China to domestic and foreign audiences.

Since the show's inception, Lisa and Ella have presented as especially attentive to the more tomboyish trainees. In one episode, Ella acclaimed three popular tomboyish trainees for being cute and handsome.³ In one round of group competitions, the tomboyish trainee drawing most attention, who also happened to be the former leading member of LadyBees, Liu Yuxin, gave an incredible rendition of the song *Miss You 3000* with her group members. During Liu's eye-catching performance, the camera cuts back and forth between Liu, who looks directly into the camera in an extremely affectionate way, and Lisa, who is entranced by the performance while watching from South Korea. As Liu's performance ends, both Lisa and the other trainees (who are waiting and watching the competition backstage) are captured on camera exclaiming ecstatically. Seeing Lisa's appreciation of Liu's dancing, some trainees admit to being fans of Liu and to 'being titillated' (*bei liaodaole*) by her charm. Although these scenes were not necessarily staged, Lisa's facial expressions and reactions highlighted

³ See <https://tv.sohu.com/v/dXMvMzM4OTE1ODE0LzQwNTAyMDMzNi5zaHRtbA==.html>

on camera serve as an ultimate queer stimulus for cultivating and eulogising Liu's queer persona, as shown by the dramatic increase in the number of bullet-screen comments posted on the *YWY2* streaming site, iQiyi, in response to this part of the show. Many comments are explicit queer interpretations of this sequence, such as 'Lisa is enchanted by Liu' and 'I want to marry Liu' (Figures 1 and 2).⁴

[INSERT FIGURE 1 AND 2 HERE]

Figure 1. A screen capture of Lisa's response to Liu's dancing.

Figure 2. A screen capture of other trainees' responses to Liu and some bullet-screen comments showcasing the audience's queer readings of Lisa and Liu's interactions.

This is just one case among many on *YWY2* that demonstrates the multivalent queer cultivation fuelled by the show's format, the queer aura of girl group icons and trainees, and the participatory functions of the show's streaming site. It not only spotlights and universalises female androgyny and same-sex attraction, but also fosters the queer desires of its trainees, mentors and audiences. The show was produced during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in China (approximately January–June 2020). The Guangzhou Chimelong Park where the group camp was located was locked down in February 2020. For most parts of the show, the trainees were locked down together, and the non-PRC-based mentors Lisa and Ella, who were not allowed to travel to mainland China, were only able to coach the trainees online. As the pandemic spread, China experienced an online and offline proliferation of discrimination against female nurses and doctors, domestic violence against women and girls, and hostile comments saturated with slut-shaming and sexism against

⁴ The Chinese character 'marry' is gendered. The comment uses the word *jia*/嫁, which usually refers to a woman's practice of getting married, usually to a man. Therefore, the comment connotes a female-identifying queer desire to marry Liu.

women of all ages. The isolated, girl-only ambience of *YWY2* amplified a ‘girls-help-girls’ outlook against the worsening misogynistic sociocultural situation in China’s public spaces, and eventually led to the show’s widespread, unexpected popularity throughout the most desperate period of the pandemic.

In tribute to those on the front line who contributed most to China’s fight against Covid-19, all of the trainees filmed a music video in which they performed the song *Tiny (Weiwei)*, written by the *YWY2* trainee, Fu Ruqiao. Using the pronoun ‘she’ (她) to refer to the lives trivialised in society, the video featured images of female medical workers while the lyrics praise the perseverance, bravery, imminent power and contribution of young girls and women. The video was well received by the general public⁵ and was shared by *Enlightenment Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, on Weibo, the most widely used social media platform in China.

A similar strategy for adding a state-approved feminist flavour to this queer-natured show can be identified in the last episode, which aired on 30 May 2020, and during which the nine most highly ranked trainees were selected to debut as the girl group THE9. The trainee who received the most votes, Liu Yuxin, and fellow top-nine finalist Lu Keran (a former member of the disbanded group FCC-Acrush) are both tomboyish. Even before the result was revealed, the combining of tomboyish with feminine trainees to form a girl band provoked massive public dispute and protest online.⁶ Some self-proclaimed feminist activists went online to revile hypermasculine girls on the show as male impersonators or sexual perverts. In the last performance before announcing the ranking of the trainees, *SVG* idol Li Yuchun was invited to perform the song *For Every Girl* with all the 109 trainees. Aged 36 and remaining

⁵ The video can be accessed at: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/h0974ri5e9d.html>

⁶ Most disputes on popular Chinese social platforms Douban.com and Weibo involved entangled heterosexist, homophobic and transphobic interpretations of female masculinity on *YWY2*. See, for example, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/414541463>

single and independent, ‘Li’s oscillation between androgynous and more feminine fashion since the late 2000s’ (Lavin 2010: 246) holds significant value for problematising the mainstream heterosexist pressure imposed on Chinese women to get married and procreate at a young age. The lyrics of the song, written by Li in 2019, express a wish for all young girls to grow up with confidence, persist in dream-chasing and stay healthy, innocent and loving. Earlier, during the deteriorating sociocultural situation for women, the song was shared on Weibo by state-run organisations and official media outlets, such as the All-China Women’s Federation and *People’s Daily*, to celebrate International Women’s Day on 8 March 2020.

Li began the *YWY2* performance with this officially-endorsed feminist song and invited all the trainees to join her on stage to sing the chorus together. In a touching scene at the end of the performance, Li (who had risen to stardom 15 years earlier) and Liu (the most popular trainee with a queer persona on the most successful show of 2020) stand side by side at the centre of the stage to sing together, expressing the wish that young girls be treated tenderly by the world and have faith in themselves (Figure 3). This televisual mediation of the various multi-generational role models of China’s female androgyny, wrapped in an officially approved feminist shield, creates both constraints on and affordances for feminist and queer women’s imaginaries in China. It legitimises different forms of female gender and sexual nonnormativities (such as tomboyism, sisterhood, and adult women’s singledom and androgyny) that have been monetised in the entertainment industry and ideologically endorsed by the party-state, while also urging alliances and solidarity between feminists and queer women of different generations to fight against disappointing realities.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Figure 3. A screen capture of Li and Liu singing together in the last episode of *YWY2*.

Less than two weeks after *YWY2* ended, *SWMW* aired online. Combining components of South Korean celebrity competition shows, such as *I Am A Singer* (MBC, 2011–), with an idol group-cultivating format, it centres around a feminist-based, anti-ageist slogan: ‘Become dark horses after turning thirty, bring youth back to the right place’ (*Sanshi er li, qingchun guiwei*). The show invited 30 female celebrities over the age of 30 to compete and eventually form a seven-member girl group X-SISTER. The celebrity trainees included tomboyish *SVG* participants, such as Xu Fei and Li Sidanni, and former Korea-based girl group members, such as Wang Feifei and Meng Jia, who were both in the band Miss A and known for their close relationship. All the celebrities had solid queer fanbases and had, for the most part, remained single. Conventionally feminine participants who were imagined in *SVG* queer fandoms to be typical feminine partners, such as Zhang Hanyun and Yu Kewei, were also among the celebrity trainees. Other trainees were famous for having devised their own queer appeal, as in the case of the Hong Kong pop star Yumiko Cheng, who had presented herself as an avid (queer) fan of *YWY2* winner Liu Yuxin. Even extraordinarily attractive participants who were formerly married or who had children, such as Ning Jing and Zhang Yuqi, projected strong, independent public personas that destabilised heteropatriarchal stereotypes of female ageing and subverted normative expectations for women’s social-familial roles as mothers and (ex-)wives.

In contrast to the use of the ‘schoolgirl’ trope, the show drew on the transnational female aesthetics of ‘older or big sisters’ (*jiejie*) to rationalise its presentations of women with diverse female genders, sexualities and marital-familial statuses. In the Chinese and Sinophone worlds, ‘older sister’ denotes the persona of a powerful, mature woman or a verbally forceful diva who is feminist and queer-supportive, while also being used as a campy, empowering means of self-reference by effeminate gay men who are often denigrated within gay communities (Tsai 2020). It thus carries a multivalent potential to overturn ‘gender

hierarchy and heteronormativity' in both mainstream society and LGBT communities (Tsai 2020: 154). Furthermore, the 'older sister' persona is also an ideal type widely favoured in East Asian and Chinese lesbian and queer fan cultures (Guo and Kong 2023; Welker 2008). Yet, off screen, non-heterosexual-identifying women with 'older sister' personas are relatively rare in China owing mainly to the enormous sociocultural pressure on adult women to grow out of gender and sexual nonnormativities and to enter heterosexual marital-familial lives, rendering female androgyny and homoeroticism nostalgic or even impossible (Martin 2010). Confronting this despairing reality, *SWMW* actively and aggressively appropriated these intersected queer and feminist undertones of the 'older sister' imaginary and presented a diverse set of female genders and sexualities embodied by real-world public figures.

Consequently, the show's celebrity participants are referred to as 'older sisters' rather than as trainees or contestants. Many performances involve legendary LGBT-supportive or feminist-flavoured songs from Taiwanese divas, such as A-mei and Jolin Tsai. The show's theme song, *Ms Priceless (Wujia zhi jie)*, was also written by Li Yuchun and released on 18 June 2020. Performing the song alongside the other older sisters, Li opened the show's final episode on 4 September 2020, during which the ranking of the trainees was revealed. The queer-cum-feminist potential of the show's focus on cultivating 'older sisters' is writ large through these tactical arrangements, although subtle forms of (self-)censorship can also be found throughout the show. For instance, there were some overt queerbaiting scenes, such as the flirting and quasi-kissing moments between Wan Qian and Li Sidanni in the group's rendition of the song *Gentlewoman*, which were cut from the final streamed versions. Some lyrics delivering progressive feminist and queer political views or sexually suggestive meanings, such as the Taiwan pop songs, *Catfight* and *Rose of Teenager*, were only briefly summarised in the show's subtitles or significantly changed to something innocuous to evade triggering the alarm of official censors.

Notably, during the streaming of *SWMW*, the cyber neologism, ‘tycoons in the *ji* community’ (*jiquan dalao*) has flooded Chinese cyberspace and become closely associated with the names of popular *SWMW* celebrities. The word *ji* is a highly gendered, queer-essenced word, homophonous to *both* 基, a cross-Sinophone transliteration of the English word ‘gay’ (denoting mostly nonheterosexual men and related queer cultures in the Chinese-speaking world), and 姬, a playful, cyber Chinese buzzword that encompasses a wide range of queer women-related discourses, including but not limited to lesbianism, women’s nonheterosexual potential, female homoeroticism and/or queer readings of women (Guo and Kong 2023: 57). While the BL and male androgyny-related *ji* culture has been disparaged by the government in Chinese public and media spaces, the queer women-centred *ji* culture has been rapidly expanding in recent Chinese TV and fan spaces, as exemplified by *SWMW* and its online queer fandoms.

This contradiction can be explained by the fact that the show’s feminist-disguised representations of queer women largely enrich public and media imaginaries of both heterosexual and queer female adult lives that have been one-dimensional, if not stigmatised and invisible, in Chinese entertainment media and pop cultural spaces. One of the major conventions of the show – to select a powerful, mentally strong, beautiful older woman with extraordinary talents as a ‘girl’ group leader – fits neatly into the gendered aesthetics desired in Chinese lesbian and queer fan communities, such as being a dominant Alpha female who is not necessarily visibly masculine but needs to be motherly and tender yet valiant enough to overthrow the heteropatriarchal ideals fettering adult women in both domestic and professional settings. The personalities of the *SWMW* older sisters, as well as the show’s presentation of the intimate ‘sisterhood’ between them, also diversify the gendered and aged imaginaries of the dominant partner in same-sex relationships and disrupt the rigid binarist distinctions of active (*gong/top/masculine*) and passive (*shou/bottom/feminine*) sex roles in

lesbian romances that have problematically occupied both Chinese lesbian media and queer women-centred fan productions.

Following the huge success of idol girl group shows in 2020, iQiyi produced an idol boyband-cultivating programme *YWY3* in February 2021 and invited queer icons Li Yuchun and Lisa to serve as celebrity mentors on the male-focused show. Filled with images of ‘little fresh meat’ and celebrated in queer fandoms of male homoeroticism, its production was unexpectedly called off by the government before its final episode could be streamed. The termination, caused by controversies surrounding some fans’ irrational behaviours and one popular trainee’s ‘family involvement in sex work’ and drug dealing (Looi 2021), was part of the official ‘Clean and Bright’ (*qinglang*) ideological campaign to ‘rectify chaotic situations in fan circles’ (*zhengzhi fanquan luanxiang*). Despite this sudden cancellation, the transnationally influential queer personas of Li and Lisa were useful in establishing the legitimacy of the *YWY3* trainees’ male queerness, reversing *SVG*’s use of Kris Wu’s inter-Asian male androgyny as a referencing point for its unconventional high-profiling of numerous tomboyish girls in 2016.

YWY3 also incorporated subtly designed queerbaiting segments to influence audiences’ queer readings of Lisa. For example, in one episode, Lisa waits online in South Korea to coach the trainees. The camera captures her holding Hank, her Blackpink bandmate Rosé’s dog. When her segment begins, Lisa is unusually inattentive to the camera but keen on talking to someone in the room who is off-camera, at whom Hank is also staring.⁷ This ‘incident’ soon drew the attention of many members of the large-scale Chinese queer fandom, ‘Pork Belly’ (*wuhuarou*), which is dedicated to queer readings of Lisa and Rosé as a couple. The clip was soon widely shared on Chinese video-streaming sites by queer fans and generated speculation that the person not captured by the camera was Rosé. In another

⁷ See https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1TK4y1K74Q/?vd_source=f3e3df9da359c32117ab3ccafacae14

episode, the boy band Produce Pandas (*xionghao tang*) performed Blackpink's song *Kill This Love* to demonstrate their love for Lisa. The five members of Produce Pandas are known for their more rotund physiques yet caring-cum-masculine personalities. They have been promoted on *YWY3* as a revolutionary boy band concept to challenge the aesthetic stereotypes of 'little fresh meat'. Nevertheless, they also present a recognisably gay aesthetic to many LGBT audiences (Hong 2021a), and their camp performance of *Kill This Love*, in particular, incurred numerous bullet-screen comments explicitly identifying them as 'big motherly bottoms' (*damuling*; a specific gender/sex type in Chinese gay communities). Some of the comments jokingly ask Lisa to share the video of this cover dance with her 'wife' Rosé (Figure 4). Lisa later praised the performance in an interview and admitted that she had proudly shown it to her Blackpink bandmates (Figure 5).⁸ In response to the interview, many viewers posted the same bullet-screen comment, 'cue ji's love' (meaning to call for the attention and support of queer fans and icons), to parodically name this dance.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 AND 5 HERE]

Figure 4. A screen capture of Producer Pandas' cover dance and Lisa's reaction, with overt bullet-screen comments revealing their gayness.

Figure 5. A screen capture of the interview video, showing many bullet-screen comments referring to Produce Pandas' performance as 'cue ji's love'.

The examples provided here, drawn from the boyband-cultivating programme *YWY3*, showcase how the convergence of the queer aspects of *both* global TV formats (which allow cross-gender performances and queer-natured mentorship between queer icons and trainees)

⁸ See https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Xy4y1b7o9/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=f3e3df9da359c32117ab3ccafacaac14

and idol girl group cultures (which afford amicable situations and manoeuvres to nurture and marketise queer relationships and fantasies) offer captivating reference points and exhibition spaces for nonnormative male gender aesthetics, as well as opportunities for extensive queerbaiting and queer readings concerning campy, gay images in commercial media.

Conclusion

The queer commercialisation of Chinese TV has not only served China's economic-political interests but also decentred the global queer entertainment and pop cultural circle, which was previously dominated by Euro-American and East Asian productions. Recognising China's rise a global queer media giant, this current research proposes the framework of 'queer convergence' in an age of globalisation and digitisation to underline the role of global TV formats in shaping and facilitating contemporary Chinese queer TV and idol cultures. While some formats contain queer-suggesting or queer-natured designs, such as the homosocial setting of competition shows, certain formats have been mediators for the transculturation of non-normatively gendered aesthetics, such as the male androgyny promoted by inter-Asian adaptations of *Boys Over Flowers/Meteor Garden*.

Noting the striking differences between now-defunct queer male-focused pop culture and the recent boom in queer women-centred TV in China, my examination has paid particular attention to the emergence, sustained popularity and diversity of queer women on formatted shows. My account has revealed that the televisual-cultural conventions accompanying China's localisation, remaking and innovation of global TV formats often demonstrate a potential to allude to and invite feminist-glazed imaginaries of queer women both on and off Chinese screens. Meanwhile, the adaptive and indigenising processes of formats and idol group cultures have converged to form expressive venues in the presumed normativising and repressive Chinese mainstream social and commercial media spaces. This

queer convergence simultaneously articulates and capitalises on nonnormative female genders and sexual identities, subjectivities and desires. Perpetuated by competing interests and sometimes also cooperative forces from commercial media industries, the government, celebrities and fans, and various feminist and queer communities, girl idol-manufacturing and girl group-cultivating TV formats have become particularly rich grounds for citing, negotiating and conjugating local, inter-Asian and global feminist and LGBT pop cultures to reflect on and interrogate the heteropatriarchal histories, lived experiences and struggles of Chinese women. This lasting queer women-centred televisual phenomenon in contemporary China has now been transformed into a visual-contextual ‘cue’ to reclaim the too-often officially ‘killed’ or ‘unspeakable’ queer men-related representations, while continuing to work as an assemblage that stages, communicates with and reconciles the conflicts and incongruences between commercialised queer pop and state-backed feminism.

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