

Music-Based TV Talent Shows in China: Celebrity and Meritocracy in the Post-Reform Society

by

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B. A., Huaqiao University, 2013

Extended Essays Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the

School of Communication (Dual Degree in Global Communication)
Faculty of Communication, Art & Technology

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Summer 2015

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Celebrity and Meritocracy in the Post-Reform Society*

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Abstract

Meritocracy refers to the idea that whatever our social position at birth, society should offer the means for those with the right “talent” to “rise to top.” In context of celebrity culture, it could refer to the idea that society should allow all of us to have an equal chance to become celebrities. This article argues that as a result of globalization and consumerism in the post-reform market economy, the genre of music-based TV talent shows has become one of the most popular TV genres in China and has at the same time become a vehicle of a neoliberal meritocratic ideology. The rise of the ideology of meritocracy accompanied the pace of market reform in post-1980s China and is influenced by the loss of social safety nets during China’s transition from a socialist to a market economy. By allowing celebrities created by profit-seeking industries to represent and arbitrate the “talent” that should be rewarded by society, TV talent shows normalize the neoliberal notion that all under the market system have the “equality of opportunity” to compete with one another. Thus, the cultural industries of China become dissociated from the working class to fit hegemonic models of culture and market logic. By studying the social and economic context of music-based reality TV talent shows, we can understand the changes of class and market dynamics of China in the last 30 years.

Keywords: music talent show, celebrity, meritocracy, equality of opportunity, social status

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the following people who helped me during the writing of this thesis. Without their assistance and support during the processes of writing, editing and analysis, I could never have finished this paper.

First and foremost, a special acknowledgement should be given to the director of CUC-SFU double-degree program: Professor Yuezhi Zhao. She put a lot of effort into making sure I could arrive at Vancouver in time as I received the offer of acceptance to the program very late. Without her selfless efforts and contributions, I would never have had this precious opportunity to study at SFU, open up my academic thinking patterns and become a “global citizen” through lived experiences in two different countries. She also provided me with the opportunity of doing my field placement at China Daily, which helps me better understand cross-culture exchange. I want to thank my supervisor, Dr. Frederik Lesage, for the encouragement he gave to my paper and the kind concern he showed in my meetings with him. I also want to thank Professor Zoë Druick, from whose lectures about popular culture I benefited greatly. They contributed a lot to my capstone paper, especially to the angle of analysis I took. And I am particularly indebted to Professor Katherine Reilly, because of her assignments in her class that for the first time made me think about my personal experience, to find out what is my positionality. In addition, I want to thank Sarah Chen and Dora Lau, who are backstage heroes of our programs. I particularly wish to extend a special thank you to my dear teaching assistant Byron Hauck, who gave me encouragement and useful instructions all through my studies here. Hatty Liu, one of my classmates, also richly deserves mention here. She was a tremendous adviser through some difficult ideas of this work.

In addition to the great academic support I received during this year, I also want to thank my other classmates and my parents. I honestly would not have survived this year without my dear classmates and friends. Byron Hauck, Hatty Liu, Belinda Jin, Yu Song, Shawn Jones, Sibbo Chen, Beatrice Chao, Amanda Liao, Kirsten Berry, Lucia Inyang and Anis Rahman have all helped me in so many ways. I cannot imagine my time at SFU without them. My parents, although they are in China, they took care about my progress and checked in with me all the time though Internet. From time to time, while I was abroad my father Wenhun Huang and my mother Lifang Zhou would share with me their daily life in China, which made me feel close to my hometown, my root and my dear family. I would like to thank each one of these individuals for their emotional support during the past year.

Most significantly, I want to give my appreciation to my fiancé Qiang Li for his boundless capacity to support, appease and encourage me to overcome my almost collapsed mental state in this difficult year. In many ways, this capstone is as much yours as it is mine. It is very difficult to describe the gratitude I feel for your quiet contribution you continuously give to all aspects of my life. You are the one who witnessed what I have experienced during this momentous year, and I hope that reaching the ending this milestone means the beginning of a new and exciting stage of our future life together.

Finally, I should really express my deepest gratitude to Chairman Mao Zedong, for without him I will never have this priceless opportunity to be in this environment and do this research. Moreover, I have to acknowledge all the contestants of the music-based reality TV talent shows I have studied, and wish that all of us can be free to achieve our dream one day.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

The Chinese economic reform policy, “Reform and Opening Up,” was launched in December 1978. This policy broke the “iron rice bowl,” the system of guaranteed livelihood under the Communist era. Consequently, the identities of Chinese singers, who comprised a part of China’s “literary and art workers” (*Wenyi Gongzuo Zhe*) changed from that of laborers who serve the people to celebrities of the music industry. Starting in 2004, this phenomenon became much more obvious as a new genre of music-based reality TV talent shows was introduced into China. Following this, the influence of meritocracy began to take on increased significance in China. The term “celebrity” in a neoliberal economic and social context means an elite group of people whose social status is based on their ability and talent. In the context of this paper, celebrity refers to an elite group singers who are the highest paid and endorsed by various industries. All of the celebrities mentioned in this paper gained and maintain their fame and social status through their singing and other marketable talents by the music industry.

As Drotne (2002) points out, music-based reality TV talent shows swept the world with the first version of *Big Brother* broadcast in 1999. However, this type of TV show was not introduced into China until 2004 with Hunan Satellite’s *Super Girls Voice*, a talent show for female contestants based on an *American Idol* model that aired between 2004 and 2006. This show gained quick fame as it was viewed by more than 400 million people in 2005 (Jian & Liu, 2009, 524). The tremendous success of *Super Girls Voice* had led this kind of show to become an increasingly hot topic for debate in

academic and public circles. This is because as Hall (1993) says, popular culture “has connections with local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies, and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and everyone experiences of ordinary folks” (quoted in Meng, 2009, p. 258). Numerous analysts have used this show as an epoch-making example to interpret the nature of public culture in contemporary China. A significant number of academic discussions identify this kind of show as the production of a new public consciousness with potential to bring democracy to China (Yardley, 2005; R. Zhou, 2005; Jian & Liu, 2009; Meng, 2009).

The primary aim of this article is to analyze the dynamics of an ideology meritocracy that enables these music-based TV talent shows to be popular and is also popularized by these shows in return. The popularization of meritocracy in this paper refers to the acceptance of celebrity culture and the notion of equality of opportunity in the public consciousness, which is indirectly analyzed through the way that popular culture products are marketed to the public in the media. As Matt Stahl (2012) points out in his book, *Unfree Masters: Popular Music and the Politics of Work*, “in [a] utopian society, all participants – representing all social groups in a pop culture galactic federation – represent themselves as equally unknown individuals before impartial advisors and a popular electorate, a liberal regime in which all participants have equal access to the essential resource: the rhetoric of coherent, authentic, individual selfhood” (p. 59). This kind of ideology is propagated by TV talents shows and is made possible by the social transformation that has occurred through the economic reforms after 1978. I do not discuss the cultural, democratic or gender implications of this ideology. Instead by focusing on several representative music-based Chinese version talent shows in post-reform China, the paper aims to explore the masking of meritocracy in popular culture and participatory celebrity culture. To be more specific, this paper intends to explore how talent shows convinces common people to participate in the shows and contribute their labour to the music industry without necessarily gaining anything in the end. Following the immense popularity of talent shows, I will analyze what kind of meritocracy is being

propagandized to Chinese youth, and how these secrets are “ritually” embodied in this genre of entertainment (Lu, 2006).

All of the shows chosen in this study have achieved high ratings, especially among China’s young generation as represented by those were born after 1978 and are less than 40 years old. More importantly, the overwhelming majority of the contestants’ ages in these shows are also less than 40, with many in their late teens or early twenties. The analysis in this paper focuses on the celebrities who act as coaches in talent shows are portrayed in the shows’ marketing, in newspaper stories and behind-the-scenes footage. It also focuses on how the idea of celebrity is represented in these three media. Under the cover of being “open for all” to participate, this genre of talent show convinces contestants to be entrepreneurial, to utilize their voice, and to act upon their dreams in order to obtain the chance of achieving fame, enjoying tremendous honor, and becoming a popular celebrity. This paper intends to deconstruct this popular culture phenomenon, asking how these kinds of programs can continue to recruit a great number of contestants without guarantee of success. Apart from some rare cases that a tiny minority of contestants win a place for themselves in this high-risk, high-reward music business industry, what are the economic prospects for the vast majority of constants?

Ultimately I will demonstrate that talent shows domesticate and disseminate a neoliberal market-based ideology of meritocracy in two ways. First of all, with the celebrity coaches system, which lets celebrities who already work in the industry to gain authority as cultural experts who offer “wisdom” for succeeding in the meritocratic system. Secondly, through the format of participation-based TV shows, which reduces the demand on institutional resources for TV stations to produce shows and for music and talent corporations to train a celebrity. Also, I will analyze the phenomenon of “sub-celebrities” that are produced by these programs. These individuals are indoctrinated with and are shown by this paper to embody the notion of an “equality of opportunity”

through marketplace mechanisms comparable to Marx's "equality of outcome" through the community (Cooray, 1988).

In this paper, the main objects of analysis are celebrity coaches, grassroots contestants from an imported talent show named *The Voice of China*, as well as sub-celebrity contestants from this show. Sub-celebrity contestants are those who gained their public recognition from talent shows and return to participate other talent shows afterwards. I will also look at contestants from the show *Sing My Song* who have been working in the music industry many years, but have only achieved second or third-tier name recognition. I develop my argument in the four following chapters. In the second chapter, I try to explore the historical and modern development of entertainment workers in China. I take a brief overview of singers' identities from celebrities in the pre-Communist era to "literary and art workers" in the Maoist era, and finally back to celebrities in contemporary times. These chapters focus on the economic and social dynamics that supported the second identity change, from "literary and art workers" back to celebrities. This change coincides with the time that talent shows became popular in China. With the overview, this paper gives a brief introduction about the background of how the media industry takes in amateur musicians and sets them up as participants in a neoliberal meritocratic system through talent shows.

Third and fourth chapters are dedicated to a case study. I choose *The Voice of China* and other representative shows as examples. I use content directly from the marketing and presentation of the shows, as well as behind-the-scenes footage and newspaper stories about the economic conditions of the show and the contestants to describe how the shows construct an image of celebrity. By employing these, this paper will be able to indirectly find out what motivates contestants to participate these shows and why these shows are attractive to large and young audiences. In these chapters, I also dig into news reports of the socio-economic status of sub-celebrities and lesser-known musicians. The focus of analyzing such content is to define what kind of meritocracy the program normalizes and how they try to encourage people to identify with celebrity culture.

In conclusion, following Littler's (2013) claim regarding "the use of meritocracy as a plank of neoliberal political rhetoric and public discourse," I hope that it will become more clear how talent shows, under the cloak of participatory celebrity culture, breeds obedience to the ideology of meritocracy to China.

Chapter 2.

The Rise of Music Programs in China

2.1 Chinese Singers' Identity through History

According to sociologist Chris Rojek (2004), in modern Western contexts:

Singers' identity changes rhetoric and public discourse for salvation have been undermined. Celebrity and spectacle fill the vacuum. They contribute to the cult of distraction that valorizes the superficial, the gaudy, the domination of commodity culture. The cult of distraction is therefore designed to mask the disintegration of culture ... Celebrity provides monumental images of elevation and magic. (p. 90-91).

However, the process by which singer-celebrities emerged and gained cultural status in modern China has a different historical and social background.

2.1.1 The Birth of "Celebrity"

In China, it was not until the twentieth century that gramophone records were first introduced, demonstrated by a young Frenchman called Labansat at a stall on Tibet Road in Shanghai. This young man made his fortune with his gramophone, and in 1908, when he has earned enough money from showcasing this product, he established "China's first record company as a subsidiary of the multinational Compagnie-Generale Phonographique Pathe-Freres" (Jone, 2001, p. 53). The Mandopop genre (modern Chinese popular music) and celebrity culture started from here. The popularization of broadcast media and gramophones, and especially the rise of sound movies, paved the way for Zhou Xuan and six other singer-actresses to become known as the Seven Great Singing Stars in 1930s.

During this early era, female singers experienced the identity change from mere “sing-song girls” (or “flower girls,” *Ge’nv*), who also worked as courtesans, to “celebrities” (*Mingxing*) focused on singing. This identity shift was accompanied by a major increase in the respect given to singing and entertainment as a line of work.

2.1.2 “Literary and Art Workers”

Another pivotal period in the professional identity of singers was the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Cultural undertakings were important parts of the Chinese revolution and construction of a socialist state. However, popular music at the time did not meet the standards of Marx’s and Lenin’s treatment of literature and art or Mao Zedong’s thoughts regarding literature and art. In the Speech on Literature and Art Forum in Yan’an, Mao Zedong proclaimed that literature and art should take the proletariat, laboring people and vulnerable social groups as the target audience instead of serving the urban petty bourgeoisie (Mao, 1942).

As a result, popular music made for the commercial market was suppressed by the communist regime. Revolutionary songs and national music (Min Yue) were promoted as the only kinds of music to be recorded (Broughton & Ellingham & Trillo, 2000, p.33). China Record Corporation (CRC) became the only music recording industry body in China (Li, 2006; Tschmuck & Li, 2012). In this context, the identity of “celebrities” was regarded as a decayed term representing bourgeois culture, and the term “literary and art workers” became widely used to refer to people who obtained livelihood from the arts. The consumption imperative of literature and art was replaced by educational concerns. Although the term “literary and art workers” still shared some similar characters with the term “celebrities”, as some found fame through public performances and were represented as symbolic individuals for different cultural groups, the meaning behind the identity of “literary and art worker” is significantly different from that of

“celebrity”. When the identity of celebrity was abandoned due to its bourgeois connotations, the identity of literary and art worker represented high political value, as one was required to “be active in forming intimate contacts with the workers, peasants, and soldiers” (Mao, 1942, p. 468). Moreover, as Mao (1942) pointed out literature and art should:

fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy. This ethic helps the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind. (p.459).

Briefly, literature and art were employed as effective weapons for educating and propagating. They did not produce commodities for people to buy or consume, but connected people to political sensibilities. Furthermore, the working conditions of these workers were changed from the previous era of celebrity. The development of state-owned cultural enterprises such as the CRC meant that the nature of literary and art work was like that of all workers who worked for the nation. They enjoyed the state’s guarantee of a livelihood, also called as “iron rice bowl” (Harvey, 2005, p. 125). This meant the workers not only enjoyed “the security of employment” offered by state-owned enterprises (SOEs), but also enjoyed “a wide range of welfare and pension benefits” (p. 125).

2.1.3 Rebirth of “Celebrity”

The identity of Chinese singers reached a major historical turning point in 1978. In this year, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Party Central Committee announced that “from chaos [of the Culture Revolution], [the Party will] bring order, carry on our cause and forge ahead” politically (Hu, 1981). It did so by bringing about ideological emancipation in culture, implementing market reforms and increasing interactions between China and the international world in communication (Yin, 2007), Chinese society entered a period of comprehensive transition. In the context of these

changes, “celebrity” once again became used to describe people who work in literature and art fields and enjoyed a high degree of fame. This shift has very serious social and political implications.

Starting from these reforms, the notion of “celebrity” was no longer critiqued, but became accepted by the dominant political ideology and was gradually legitimized by the government. Two of the significant signs of this legitimization occurred in 1983, when the first Spring Festival Gala was broadcasted on CCTV, and in 1984, when four celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan were invited on the Gala for the first time (Li, 2013). The legitimization of the notion of celebrity was a prerequisite for China’s television and music industry to produce celebrities of their own. And more importantly, the legitimization of celebrities is an evidence that meritocracy, an important aspect of neoliberal culture, was introduced into China. The ideology of meritocracy is used to describe “a social system with allows people to achieve success proportionate to their talents and abilities, as opposed to one in which social class or wealth is the controlling factor” (Quinion, 2001). The use of meritocracy to legitimate a market-based social system corresponds to how music-based talent shows select contestants, which is through the notion that those with the most musical talent will be featured.

The identity change of people in the singing and entertainment field from “literary and art worker” to “celebrity” happened in recent years in the context of China’s social transition and the prosperity of TV variety entertainment programs in China. In the following section, I will develop the discussion regarding celebrity identity in music-based talent shows in more detail.

2.2 Multifaceted Attributes to China’s Social Transition

How one should address singers and writers is never a simple thing. Chinese society has seen not only a change in term from “literature and art worker” to “celebrity,”

but in the past 30 years there has been political and social changes accompanying this change in the language. The notion of celebrity, which belongs to the ideal of meritocracy that is based in neoliberal ideology, reflects “the new forms of social mobility which are engendered within allegedly ‘post-industrial’ society” (Littler, 2013, p. 60). But how was a socialist ideology replaced by a neoliberal ideology regarding literary and art “work?” The following is a summary of social and economic dynamics of the past thirty years of which led Chinese society to a post-socialist China.

2.2.1 Globalization

Before discussing China’s social transition in detail, we cannot avoid discussing the more encompassing context — the worldwide phenomenon of globalization. Globalization influences and has been intertwined with the specific processes of the transition of Chinese society directly. This process began when the Chinese government embarked upon “Reform and Opening Up” as its national policy, and picked up speed after China entered the World Trade Organization in 2001 (Branstetter & Lardy, 2006). The term “globalization,” however, can be taken as a trite slogan brought forward and dominated by the developed countries of the West. While the word “globalization” sounds like a process that operates equally and globally, it actually represents a hegemonic ideology. As renowned sociologist Zygmunt Bauman notes, the notion behind the dominant understanding of “globalization” is that it is a destiny which could not be avoided or reversed (Lull, 1995, p. 150). But such considerations simplify the:

complex set of interacting and often countervailing human, material and symbolic flows that lead to diverse, heterogeneous cultural positioning and practices which persistently and variously modify established vectors of social, political and cultural power. (Lull, 1995, p. 150).

As a supplement for this definition, Devereux (2007) questions that globalization might be the latest brand of colonialism, as he describes:

The globalization of everyday life for a significant number of the world's citizens is as a result of the restructuring of economic and cultural activities on global lines. While the media and communications industries are part and parcel of this more general restructuring of economic activity at a global level, it is they which are primarily responsible for the promotion of the notion of globalism as well as contributing to the qualitative shift in how modernity or postmodernity is experienced by a large number of social actors. (p. 30).

2.2.2 Consumerism

With the globalization of media and communications industries, Western countries, especially the United States and its cultural industries, have expanded and invaded cultural spheres in all corners of the world. For example, Disney's animated characters, Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse and Snow White, are as known and welcomed abroad as in America, giving global audiences a sense of synchronized modernization. However, cultural globalization is more than selling cultural products worldwide, as the more significant issue is the selling of concepts; these include consumerism and cultural imperialism, which I would discuss more in detail later (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1984). The most significant feature of consumerism emphasizes consumption, treating material desire and sensual experience as the main purpose and highest value in the pursuit of the good life.

Concurrently with globalization, consumerism was introduced into China, and it has become a part of the people's common sense. Moreover, the Chinese government is now trying to raise the country's economy by encouraging domestic consumption (Wassener, 2014). On the one hand, consumerism sets entertainment and amusement as a main social objective. On the other hand, while the cultural ideology of consumption consistently spreads a perfect, enviable and desirable quality of life through the production and representation of celebrity lifestyles, there are no measures to satisfy the actual material need of the common people. As consumerism has become the most

“spreadable” cultural platform, it has become a key driving force in cultural globalization. Moreover, “television programming evolved hand-in-hand with consumerism, at first in its birthplace in America during the mid-20th century” (J. Progler, 2014). The culture of consumerism is also a direct cause of the appearance and the rapidly expanding presence of TV recreational programs dedicated to creating and showcasing celebrities.

2.3 Domestic Attributes: Modern Chinese Celebrity Culture

One of useful methods to discuss contemporary celebrity culture in China is to contextualize it in the dynamics of economic and social power in China today.

2.3.1 “Market Economy”

Back to China’s domestic context, starting from “Reform and Opening Up,” the term “market economy” is one of the most frequent words used in policies in the past three decades. In 1978, the third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee pushed China on to the road of its historic reform and opening-up drive. In 1982, the Twelfth National Party Congress emphasized its goal of “correctly implementing the principle of the leading role of the planned economy and the supplementary role of market regulation” (The 12th National Party Congress, 1982). Deepening this reform in 1984, the Third Plenary Session of the Twelfth Central Committee recommended that the country implement “a planned commodity economy” (People’s Daily Online, 2008). In 1992, Deng made speeches during his “inspection tour in the South” and pinpointed that “the proportion of planning to market forces [in the economy] is not the essential difference between socialism and capitalism” (Deng, 1992). Following this direction, in 1992, the 14th National Congress “declared that the target of China’s economic restructuring was to establish a socialist market economic system” (People’s Daily Online, 2013). Under a market economy, people’s material living conditions have been improving. Meanwhile, their desire for entertainment is also increasing. Also, because of

the emphasis on economic development, a lot of areas of life were commodified that were not before in the socialist era, especially in cultural fields.

As China's highly centralized economic system shifted to the principles of market economics, the nation's mass media also experienced change. China's mass media is now facing the combined imperatives of a socialist and a market system: they survive by propagating the party line, but live off of profits. In the year 1985, China divided its tertiary industries into four levels, with the third level composed of departments which should aim at promoting "people's intellectual and moral standards and their scientific and cultural development levels" (quoted from Central Compilation & Translation Bureau, 1985). In 2003, "television" was divided into governance categories of culture, sports and entertainment, which was aimed to make Chinese media responsive to market values (translated from National Bureau of Statistic of the People's Republic of China, 1985). Then, in 2004, the National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China put the television industry into the third core layer of cultural industry. All of these policies and regulations indicate that Chinese media are certified to have their industrial nature, and market reforms of media have been legitimated. However, media still have the imperative to improve people's moral and intellectual standards and guide the nation's development. Market logic, with encouragement from the government, has accelerated the entertainment focus of Chinese television programming.

2.3.2 Between Profit and Propaganda

After China's socialist revolution, the nation's mass media was treated as the mouthpiece of the Party and the people employed for the use of propaganda. This function continues today. As I mentioned above, on the one hand, the central media authority is making market reform on its subsidiaries (mainly the provincial TV stations), encouraging mass media to become economically competitive become a part of industry, and continually developing relevant policies and regulations in order to

strengthen the industry. On the other hand, the function of being propaganda and the mouthpiece of the Party cannot be completely replaced during the marketization and industrialization of the media. This is reinforced by the government's policies and regulations about how to manage media industry. For example, in 2001, the Propaganda Department of the CPC, The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television and the General Administration of Press and Publication, released a symbolic document, "Decision of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television on Repealing Certain Departmental Rules and Regulatory Documents on Radio, Film and Television." The document outlines plans for how to deepen the reform of media.

Excerpts from this document identify mass media as an important part of the political superstructure of China and will continue to be guided by Party's spirit. To summarize, media reform in China faces tough requirements — media can only perform other functions on the condition that they unconditionally adhere to their policy propaganda tasks (Lin, 2003). However, though this language may seem strong, the state is also continually trying to find a balance through "the application of a more neutralized political rhetoric in the name of civilization to achieve public consent" (Meng, 2009). Under such integrated state control, Chinese literature and art, particularly in the field of television programming, still spends resources making entertainment that appeal to large or targeted audiences in order to attract more advertisers and sponsors. Thus, in summary, in socialist China, the work of literature and art belonged to the masses, and the aim of the laboring in these fields was serving the people. But after "Reform and Opening Up" was launched, the products of literature and art have been commodified, and the labor began to be accountable to a capitalist market system. As there might obviously be political risks for media to discuss political, economic and livelihood issues, producers turn even more to entertainment programs, which are less risky and more widely beloved.

Colorful entertainment programs, typified by the Spring Festival Gala produced by the combined efforts of the television stations and the music industry, are more

attractive to producers than other television genres. At the start of the 1990s, a variety show called *Super Variety Show* was the only entertainment show broadcast on CCTV-3 during primetime, but throughout the decade it inspired a wave of television galas on smaller television networks. In 1997, *Happy Camp*¹, which is still one of the China's most popular variety shows, debuted (Liu, 2013). But this is not where the story ends. Variety shows, like *Happy Camp*, were just the tip of the iceberg, and many more shows followed this model of entertainment would be introduced to Chinese audiences. In 2004, the TV talent show *Super Girls Voice* was introduced to China, and had found national popularity by 2005. Since then, *Super Girls Voice* has turned into the most representative of Chinese entertainment programs, which is indicated by charts in the next chapter. The trend toward entertainment and consumer-focused TV genres converged with the new identity of literature and art workers in post-reform China. By employing the identity of celebrity, which was created by the process of marketization of the arts, programs like TV talent shows propagate a "utopian meritocracy" ideal based on a neoliberal market ideology in which "social class ... often appear trumped by character" (Stahl, 2012, p. 53).

¹ *Happy Camp* is a Chinese variety show produced by Hunan Province Broadcasting System, which has remained in production for more than 18 years because of its popularity.

Chapter 3.

The Rise of Celebrity Culture in Music-Based Talent Shows

During the last decade, Chinese audiences witnessed a large amount of talent shows, especially those that contains musical performances. *Super Girls Voice* was the very beginning of this kind of genre, which is quite different from the traditional entertainment formats in Chinese TV at the time. In China, this was a novel format where the show instead of producers picked its participants and “workers.” Because of tremendous commercial success of 2005 *Super Girls Voice*, similar types of shows were produced in large quantities. For this reason, a mass of celebrities have emerged in the last decade from talent shows.

3.1 A Brief Summary of Music-Based Talent Shows in China

The following two tables give us a brief introduction of the history of music-based talent shows in China.

The first period of music-based talent shows²:

Table 2.1. First period talent shows, year and distributor.

| Name | Year | Distributor |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Super Girls Voice</i> | 2004/2005/2006 | <i>Hunan Satellite Television</i> |
| Super Boys Voice | 2003/2004 | Hunan Satellite Television |
| <i>My Show My Style</i> | 2004/2005/2006/2007/2008/2009 | Dragon TV |
| <i>My Hero</i> | 2006/2007 | Dragon TV |

² Information in the table is collected by the author of this paper from Baidu Baike.

The second period of music-based talent shows³:

Table 2.2. Second period talent shows, year, coach and distributor.

| Name | Year | Coach | Distributor |
|---------------------------|---------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| <i>Happy Girl Voice</i> | 2009/2011 | N/A | Hunan Satellite Television |
| <i>Happy Boy Voice</i> | 2007/2010/2013 | N/A | Hunan Satellite Television |
| <i>I Am a Singer</i> | 2013/2014/2015 | N/A | Hunan Satellite Television |
| <i>Chinese Idol</i> | 2013/2014 | Hong Han/ Ruoxuan Xu/ Xianqi Ren/ Wen Li/ Weizhong Wang/ Xiaoming Huang/ Jingming Guo | Dragon TV |
| <i>The Voice of China</i> | 2012/2013/2014/2015 | Huan Liu/ Ying Na/ Kun Yang/ Chengqing Yu/ Feng Wang/ Huimei Zhang/ Qin Qi/ Jielun Zhou | Zhejiang Satellite Television |
| <i>Duets</i> | 2013/2014/2015 | Jingteng Xiao/ Weiqi Fan/ Quan Yu/ Qishan Huang/ Zhe Tao/ Nan Sun/ Kun Yang/ Jie Zhang/ Weiwei Tan | Beijing Satellite Television |
| <i>Blossoming Flowers</i> | 2010/2011/2012 | N/A | Qinghai Satellite Television |
| <i>Mad for Music</i> | 2013/2014 | N/A | Anhui Television |
| <i>Sing My Song</i> | 2014/2015 | Huan Liu/ Huajian Zhou/ Jianya Cai/ Kun Yang/ Quan Yu | CCTV—3 |
| <i>Celebrity Battle</i> | 2013 | N/A | Jiangsu Satellite Television |

³ Information in the table is collected by the author of this paper from Baidu Baike.

3.1.1 Grassroots

In 2003, Hunan Satellite Television launched the music reality show *Super Boys Voice*, which was the first entertainment show in China to break the gala and variety show formats. Unlike these previous models that only featured singers with professional training, talent shows like *Super Boys Voice* was true to its tagline: “a music show without a threshold.” It provided a stage for all male contestants regardless of their social and professional background. Exemplifying this is Donglin He, the average high school student who became the champion of the first season of *Super Boys Voice*. When he was interviewed by the show, he said his focus was on the national standard college-entrance exam (*gaokao*) and he was participating in the show only for curiosity’s sake. Mingxuan Yu, the champion of the second season of *Super Boys Voice*, was also a student from a polytechnic school who was just interested in music. Because this show claimed to have “no threshold” for participating, it attracted many boys, mainly students, to participate. However, many famous music companies sponsored this show and the winners were given the chance to sign an employment contract with these companies.

In the subsequent year, *Super Boys Voice* and its companion show for girls, *Super Girls Voice*, swept across the whole country. In 2005, *Super Girls Voice* reached the peak of the music-based talent shows. Whenever it was broadcasted, the show would get the highest audience ratings on all provincial TV stations. Its average audience rating was 8.54%, occupying 26.22% of the market. Particularly, the finale of 2005 *Super Girls Voice* reached more than 280 million viewers, even more than the audience ratings for CCTV. In this year, the format of *Super Girls Voice* encouraged viewers to send text messages to vote for their favorite participants to remain on the

⁴ <http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/2005-08-30/1011824877.html>

show. In the final competition, the show received a total of 8,153,046 texts for voting⁵. While providing average people an opportunity to perform on TV, the show also produced many famous singers, such as Chris Lee Yuchun and Jane Zhang.

Although the *Super Boys Voice* was the first music-based talent show broadcast in China, the 2005 *Super Girls Voice* was regarded as the start of the era of music reality shows in China. After 2005, most other TV stations started to make their own music reality shows. Dragon TV originally created the music reality show *Lycra My Style My Show* and *My Hero*, which were very similar to *Super Boys Voice*. *Lycra My Style My Show* production is “organized and funded by Vivendi Universal SA's Universal Music, Shanghai Media Group and Lycra fabric owner Invista, a unit of Koch Industries Inc. of the U.S.” (Geoffrey, 2004). Contestants “sing their hearts out while wearing stretchy Lycra-based clothing, vying to win a one million yuan (about \$120,000) recording contract and career investment from Universal Music” (Geoffrey, 2004). The target consumers and contestants of these shows are young boys, mainly students with a variety of backgrounds, in a manner similar to *Super Boys Voice*. Also, these shows implemented the same audience participation mechanism of voting by text message. However, the homogeneity of these show formats on different channels seems to have made the audiences bored and tired. At least, a lot of audience said that. Moreover, the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT) started to restrict the production of music reality shows and the use of mass voting through text message in 2006 (Li & Zhao, 2014). After 2006, the music-based talent shows were gone from the public eye.

3.1.2 Sub-Celebrities

Reigniting the music-based talent show genre was *The Voice of China*, which began airing in 2012 after Zhejiang Satellite Television bought rights to its format from

⁵ <http://www.zyzw.com/shxz037.htm>

creators of the show, *The Voice of Holland*. Four famous singers served as a panel of expert musicians, who would select singers they like from hundreds of candidates to join their “teams,” offer them some coaching and then have them compete with other teams. The moving stories behind many of the contestants and distinct personalities of the coaches attracted a large new audience. The finale of the first *The Voice of China* reminded people of the spectacular finale of *Super Girls Voice* in 2005. This was the rebirth of the music based talent shows in China.

Just like before, many TV stations began to produce their own shows. But there was a common feature, different from the previous shows, which was the use of past and current music stars in key roles. They may act as coaches giving evaluation to contestants or training contestants to be professional music stars as depicted on *The Voice of China* and *Chinese Idol* by Dragon TV. Also, such music stars may themselves compete with each other on air, offering yet another novelty to attract audiences. This was a feature on shows such as *Mad for Music* made by Anhui TV, *Celebrity Battle* from Jiangsu Satellite Television, and *I Am a Singer* imported by Hunan Satellite Television. In *I Am a Singer*, which was originally a Korean talent show, has seven talented, veteran Chinese singers perform for a selected audience who votes to eliminate one singer after each week's performance. The following week, another singer joins the competition, and the lineup of artists varies throughout the course of the show. Tao Hong, the director of *I Am a Singer*, took advantage of his personal connections and made phone calls to famous music star one by one to invite them join the show (Wang, 2013). This allowed audiences to watch many A-list celebrities compete with one another, which had never happened before in Chinese music history. Indeed, *I Am a Singer* repeated *Super Girls Voice*'s record of garnishing the highest audience ratings of all TV shows in China (Wang, 2013).

Another common phenomenon in this era of talent shows was that a lot of contestants were already professional singers, but they were not yet famous. *Sing My Song* is a Chinese reality talent show that premiered on 3 January 2014 on CCTV-3

(Arts and Entertainment) channel. The series is produced by the same team that produced the *The Voice of China* and retains some of that show's format. Contestants of this show were those who released their own music on the Internet before they joined the show. One typical case is Jie Zhang, a famous singer in China who already had ample experience competing in many music-based TV talent shows. In 2004, he attended *Lycra My Style My Show* and became the champion of the show. In 2007, he attended *Happy Boy Voice* and got the fourth (Wang, 2013). In 2014, Jie joined *I Am a Singer*, and began competing with A-list singers.

It is obvious that on the one hand, the popularity of music based talent shows that choose their contestants from the grassroots have dissipated in this era. A new form of music based talent shows have arisen, which are inclined to choose contestants who have experienced the industry but have not yet found fame.

3. 2 Reasons for Music-Based Reality TV Show's Popularity

3.2.1 Crises of Television and Music Industries

A primary reason why the genre of music-based reality TV was first produced is because the television industry was experiencing an internal crisis. As audiences began to segment, following different programs on different stations, this reduced the base for each station's advertising revenue. As advertisements are the major financial sources of television industry in the post-reform era, the television industry had to change. From this context, a new business model which aims to reduce costs began to be adopted. This model emphasizes the participation of common people and abandoning the use of scripts. It also lead the way for more soft insert advertising and spots for product placement during competitions (Magder, 2004; Raphael, 2004).

An additional economic factor for the rise of music-based reality programs is related to new struggles of the music industry. Under the assault of new media, the music industry's old business models have been particularly hard hit by illegal downloading and file-sharing (Jian, 2015). The music industry has been searching and trying new commodity forms and new business practices such as partnering up with television, which present them with new revenue streams.

3.2.2 New Industrial Model

Unlike from other traditional music competition programs, which feature the nationwide recruitment of singers for state-affiliated art organizations, music-based talent shows use a "singing talent search" mechanism to recruit participants and provide its main contents. With the strategy of abandoning scripts, this kind of show sees itself as being authentic. Audiences are thought to be inclined to believe what they see on television, treating apparent spontaneity on television as a medium able to display "inherent honesty" (Wolters, 1951). This provides a challenge for producers to develop dramatic tension between a presentation of reality and imagined participation to draw audiences in. Moreover, the context of rapid innovations in media technology represents two sides of the coin. One side, as I discussed above, leads television and music industries to adopt new commodity forms and business structures. However, the other side of this coin is the entirely new opportunity for them to integrate their businesses. The production of a music-based talent show combines production companies, television stations, advertisement companies, music companies, and a variety of Internet and telecommunication companies together (Zong, 2013; Meng, 2015). This alliance creates many more contexts and channels for audiences to enjoy and participate in a show, including: watching the shows from television or through Internet, and supporting their favorite stars via text-message voting or Internet voting (although these later two were outlawed in 2008).

Thirdly, in music-based talent shows, audiences play an important role as they can participate in and even decide the final outcome of the contestants. This practice is different from the format of traditional music competition shows, which required both television and music industries to independently figure out strategies on how to connect their product with target customers (Jian, 2015). Imitating a post-Fordist industrial model, this practice aims at exploring audiences' preference, expressions and choices. With this practice, television and music industries save costs on audience research to determine what kind of celebrity will become popular. Music-based talent shows also offer a sense of participation for audiences, including appealing to common people to participate in the contests, voting for their favorite singers, and discussing the shows and the contestants online. In return, these activities also help draw larger audiences and improve post-production commercial opportunities.

While “the production of reality television employs neoliberalism’s economic principles, the genre’s narrative conventions reflect its morals” (Grazian, 2010, p. 69). In the next two chapters, this paper focuses on one of morals based in neoliberal ideology — meritocracy — and how celebrity culture connects with this ideology.

Chapter 4.

Why Participate?

Andrejevic (2013) claims that “reality programming has, paradoxically, undermined the uniqueness of celebrity” (p.11). Attali (1985) points out that celebrities are closely related to the commercialization of music. When music enters into the field of commodity, it connects with exchange value. Music-based talent shows extend this notion in a participatory manner by promoting celebrity as an effectively cultural capital to attract and stimulate common people to join in as audiences and participants (Collin, 2008; Turner, 2006).

During the past decade, many satellite TV stations in China launched a mass of music-based reality shows, as I mentioned above. Developing celebrities is a method for television and music industries to gain economic benefits. Except for *I Am A Singer*, whose contestants are or were mainstream singers, and *Sing My Song*, whose contestants have already worked in music industry for many years and often compose their own music, the majority of the contestants on other shows are marketed as supposedly being “common people,” although there are still a few known singers of faded glory or professional singers who are not yet famous who participate in these programs in a bid to rebuild their fame.

4.1 Different Desires

Singing is one of the oldest and most basic human talents, and at least for now it is an ability that has not been widely replaced by machines. Meanwhile, compared with other abilities, singing is also one of the most accessible and widespread talents for the grassroots, as it can be fostered during leisure time without formal training or equipment

(Wang, 2014). However, when there are celebrities who are seen as having succeeded in using their singing talent to make a living and escape from a laborious life in factories, workshops and office premises, the function of music is no longer limited to recreation or leisure (Wang, 2014). Singing talent becomes seen as an effective and influential capital which can help common people, especially those on the margins of society, to achieve the mobility past their social position at birth. Simultaneously, becoming celebrity also becomes seen as an excellent platform to realize an exquisite life of liberty from pressures of modern life.

In 2013, it was reported in the news that a talent show contestant named Liu tries to sell his little son in order to make money to participate in a talent show. Liu is a father who has no proper occupation. His favorite hobby is singing and has long desired to become a superstar. In 2013, he was scammed and lost more than 8000 RMB in order to participate in *Happy Boy Voice* show. During this contest, he was scammed by someone who promised he could get ahead in the show if he paid money, and this issue led him to financial dilemma and embarrassment. This was the psychological inducement for him to sell his son (Zhu, Lin, Wang & Wan, 2013).

Another story of the economic hardships that motivate participation comes from a young female contestant, Huang He, from the first season of *The Voice of China* in 2012:

When I was a little girl, all of my family members loved singing. My parents were workers who became laid-off very early in my life, [and] as a result, [the] economic condition of our family was not good, so it was pretty difficult for them to raise me up. I want to sing in this stage, and I am eager to breaking out of the poverty that holds my family and my hometown.(Jin, 2012).

Criticizing such notions Li Hanyin, who is a well-known Chinese veteran music producer and composer. Li spoke out about those who see such shows as their one main chance to “make it big”:

“The majority of contestants are a little bit naive and eager for instant gratification. When asked the reasons why they participate, most of them said that ‘I want to change my destiny, want to live a free and uncommitted life, and want my family to have a good life.’ These contestants think that once they participate in a show, winning a coach’s praise, that they can then acquire the status of a celebrity and live like these coaches, who are celebrities already” (Cai & Jiang, 2014).

Despite such critiques, audiences are still attracted to these stories of people who found success out of hardship. Xie Di, who used to be a white-collar worker in an advertisement company, decided to resign because of his aspiration for liberty and escape from the system. He finally found fame on *Sing My Song*. The lyrics of his song “Won’t Go to Work Tomorrow” (*Laozi Mingtian Bushang Ban*) has struck a responsive chord in the hearts of its audience:

I won’t go to work tomorrow, to live truthfully.

I won’t go to work tomorrow, to wear what I want.

I won’t go to work tomorrow, to keep being lazy and lazier.

I won’t go to work tomorrow, I don’t wanna meet my clients.

I won’t go to work tomorrow, I don’t wanna pretend to be clients’ grandson⁶.

4.2 Celebrities’ Participation in Music-Based Talent Shows

⁶In Chinese to be one’s grandson means to pretend obedient, helpless and miserable.

Music-based talent shows make use of celebrity coaches, who are vigorously promoted and exhibited in order to persuade contestants to trust their specialized expertise in music. The following is an example of the shows' show's rhetoric, taken from the opening words on each episode of *The Voice of China*.

In the first season of the show (2012), as audiences' see the *Voice of China* logo on the screen, the host of *The Voice of China* says:

“Tonight, four globally famous celebrities will be here to discover the next generation of *The Voice of China*. [These celebrities] have sold more than tens of millions albums, and boast of hundreds of thousands of fans. They are all the hottest popular singers.

“Liu Huan [is] the godfather of modern Chinese music. His voice has influenced generations, connecting the history of modern China. In 2008, the song “You And Me” [the theme song of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games] was heard all over the world.

“Na Ying is regarded as the most ever-popular ‘evergreen tree’ of modern Chinese music. During the past decade, her songs have made it to the top ten list eight times. She was the first singer from mainland China to be selected as the Best Female Artist of the Year in the Golden Melody Awards, Taiwan’s equivalent of the Grammys. And she is also the only singer from mainland China who has performed her own concerts in the Hong Kong Coliseum and the Taipei Arena.” (Jin, 2012)

However, the means by which these shows exhibit the fantasy of celebrity culture are more diverse than this, as will be shown in the following sections. Every year,



Figure 4.1.

The first costume, which was designed by Givenchy and worth more than 140,000 RMB, worn by coach Na Ying in the 2014 *The Voice of China* (Namoninilu, 2014).

millions of fresh common people also are encouraged to join in and they participate without hesitation.

4.2.1 Luxury Lifestyle

In music-based talent shows, the coaches, who are also celebrities, not only have a platform to solidify the authority of their professional status but also get to display

their aesthetics sensibilities. One of the ways is through their fashion. During the consecutive three years of *The Voice of China*, Na Ying, who is regarded as one of the best contemporary Chinese female singers, has acted as a “coach” in the show each year. What she wears in the show provokes public discussion, as she used to be an outsider in the fashion world but now dresses in tremendously overpriced clothes and personal adornments (Figure 3.2.1). The followings are some of brands she has worn on the show: Balmain Resort, Louis Vuitton, Roberto Cavalli Fall, Dolce & Gabbana Fall, Alexander McQueen Resort, Dior, Viktor&Rolf, Ports, and Givenchy. It seems the purpose of her presence on *The Voice of China* was not only for her to be a musical coach but also a teacher for spreading the ideas of ultimate luxury products and a model for exhibiting high-end fashions. Correspondingly, a great deal of media figures have commented on this change and taken her as an example to educate contestants and audiences how to dress properly (Ma, 2013; Xu, 2014). On the one hand, the dressing style exemplifies celebrity culture. On the other hand, it expresses that the life of celebrity is full of luxury goods. The shows, in league with the mass media, deliver and construct an impression to their audiences that once you become a celebrity, you can enjoy the fruits of the good life just like the Na Ying.

4.2.2 From Contestants to Celebrities and Cultural Experts

Some of China’s entertainment pioneers, who once gained their fame through music-based talent shows, have returned to talent shows riding the high tide of their established fame. In these shows, instead of being the students, their status is the same as the other celebrity coaches who did not come from talent shows (Figure 3.2.2). An interesting case is Tan Weiwei (pictured above on the left), who originally excelled on the 2006 season of *Super Girls Voice* and just finished her competition on *I Am A Singer* when she became a coach on *Duets China* in the same year. The other two coaches in the photograph above, Zhang Jie and Xiao Jingtun, also gained their fame through early music-based talent shows. Coincidentally, Chris Lee Yuchun and Shang Wenjie, both of whom achieved their musical careers through the stage of *Super Girls Voice* in 2005 and

2006 respectively, returned to the stage of *Happy Boy Voice* to compete with other A-listers as celebrities. Furthermore, Lee also played as a coach on another music-based talent show, China's version of *Rising Star*. This kind of talent-recycling in the music-



Figure 4.2.

Celebrities in the picture are three coaches of *Duets China*. From left to right, Tan Weiwei, Zhang Jie and Xiao Jingteng (Huang, 2015).

based talent show model develops a fantastic blue print cyclically drawing in existent and potential contestants. It suggests that once you participate in a show, then you can gain fame, become a celebrity, and even the coach.

4.2.3 “Rolling in Dough”

As an important part of talent shows, coaches are supposed to reveal their “true self.” Their actual responsibilities and work on the show appears to be limited and focused on building drama rather than developing the singers’ art. For instance, coaches will often poach talented students — shouting “I want you” and quarrel among themselves as to who gets to work with whom. They are also always shown to ask the same kinds of questions: “Why you come to this stage? What’s your dream?” Coach Wang Feng, who is a famous Chinese rock star, would ask these questions as an open remark to each contestant of the 2013 season of *The Voice of China*. He also had the responsibility to make sure that the contestants’s answers can initiate audience emotional consonances, such as crying out with emotion when audiences hear a particularly sad love song (Zhao, 2012; Chen, 2013). Beyond helping to construct dramatic narratives in a show, coaches also engage in self-promotion. Yang Kun, a coach in the 2012 and 2014 *Voice of China* who was formerly an independent “grassroots” singer, is a representative example of this practice. During the show, he brought up his upcoming “national concert tour” as something his team could participate in, and therefore combined his role as a mentor and entertainer by helping to advance other economic spin-offs from the show. Chris Lee Yuchun, who was a coach of the 2013 *Happy Boy Voice*, shows how little coaches expert mentoring need to do on the

show, as she seldom said anything and was basically just paid for her physical presence

| The Voice of China (2013) | | Chinese Idol (2013) | |
|---------------------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Na Ying | 10,000,000 RMB | Coco Lee | 10,000,000 RMB |
| Zhang Hui Mei | 8,000,000 RMB | Han Hong | 5,000,000 RMB |
| Yu Chengqing | 6,000,000 RMB | Huang Xiaoming | 3,000,000 RMB |
| Wang Feng | 5,000,000 RMB | Wang Zhongwei | 3,000,000 RMB |
| Total | 29,000,00 RMB | Total | 21,000,000 RMB |

| Happy Boy Voice (2013) | | Duets (2013) | |
|------------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| Xie Tingfeng | 8,000,000 RMB | Xiao Jingteng | 5,000,000 RMB |
| Tao Jingying | 4,000,000 RMB | Hu Haiquan | 4,000,000 RMB |
| Chen Kun | 3,000,000 RMB | Chen Yufan | 4,000,000 RMB |
| Li Yuchun | 2,000,000 RMB | FanFan | 3,000,000 RMB |
| Total | 17,000,000 RMB | Total | 16,000,000 RMB |

Figure 4.3.

The total worth of sixteen celebrities have been coaches in different talent shows in 2013 (Gao, 2013).

and name on the show (Chen, 2013).

The Figure 4.2.3 depicts how much celebrity coaches are reimbursed for their work.⁷ High salaries and wages correspond exactly with the desires of China's young generation, which forms a majority of contestants on these shows.

4.3 The Status of a Celebrity

4.3.1 Commodification of Celebrities

According to Graeme Turner (2013), who is an Australian professor of Cultural Studies, "Celebrity is an industry that creates highly visible products that most of us by at one time or another and which play a significant part in our everyday lives" (p. 29). Celebrity is also "a symbolic form whose transmission and reception with a commercial media system renders it a cultural commodity" (Collins, 2011, p. 90).

As discussed earlier, when Chairman Mao released his talks at the *Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*, he used the title of literature and art workers to describe writers and artists whose "primary task is to understand people and know them well" (Mao, 1942, p.461). The term 'people' represents "the audiences of our literature and art [and] consists of workers, peasants, and soldiers and of their cadres" (Mao, 1942, p.459). All artists' class political stance should be "that of the proletariat and that of masses" (Mao, 1942, p.459). However, when modern China decided to launch its "Reform and Opening Up" policy and continue to deepen market reform by means like participating in WTO, the social context changed. As a result, the identity of singers as literature and art workers was abandoned and the identity as celebrity appears. In one word, this all changed with the Chinese embrace of capitalism. The following will elaborate on economic factors of this shift of identity.

⁷ The table was created by the author of this essay based on information provided by Gao (2013).

The meaning of “celebrity” in the Chinese context is laden with more meaning than denoting a simple profession. Since the beginning of the Reform era, celebrity in China has begun to acquire some capitalist characteristics. According to Sue Collins from New York University:

Celebrity is distinctly a capitalist phenomenon coinciding with changes in communication technology that enabled new forms of social mobility, the democratization of the consumption of culture goods, and the production of secular notions of popular culture. Celebrity is the democratization of fame, but more importantly, it is fame commodified. (p. 91).

On practical level, talent shows in China take advantage of the cultural embrace of celebrity and the market system, connecting the notion of skill with social advancement and reputation. Also, by reproducing the notion of celebrity continuously in TV media events (reviewed the section “Celebrities in the Music Reality TV Shows”), talent shows construct and strengthen the aura surrounding around the notion of celebrity. On traditional entertainment shows of the 90s, the entertainment industry produced popular celebrities which it could then be marketed to make further revenue for the industry, such as by using them to host a concert or appear in advertisements. But now, talent shows profit by being a platform for selling the lifestyle of celebrity culture, becoming “Pop Star Academ[ies]” (Collins, 2008; Turner, 2013; Jian, 2015).

4.3.2 Becoming the Next Celebrity

When examined within the wider paradigm of social relationships, notions popularized by talent shows and reflected by songs such as “Won’t Go to Work Tomorrow” notion embody an act of resistance— to escape from routine life and struggle in the era after the “iron rice bowl.” In some ways, it can be understood that through China’s complex social transformation, there is a common notion among the youth that

nowadays a stable job in a capitalist-influenced economy does not mean well-being and dignity, but means exploitation and oppression.

Because young people have the desire to break from routine, the imagines of celebrities in the show meet with their desire. Moreover, at the same time, all of the talent shows mentioned in Chapter 2 share similar narratives that celebrate individual achievements by guiding the participants to, “singing out the real you”, “achieve your



Figure 4.4.

The slogan of Chinese Idol: “Chinese Idol, I am the idol (celebrity)” (Wei, 2013).

dream” while “becoming a celebrity (or idol)” (Figure 3.2.2). The encouragement for people to desire to be a celebrity in this context is related to a fantasy of having less substantial responsibility and labour, but still pursuing the really big money. The desire

for a celebrity lifestyle is also based on the ideal of consumption — to buy the things which are shown to be the basis of the high quality of life celebrities are shown to enjoy. The emergence, development and practical application of this connection of desirable lifestyles with consumption and easy work is deeply intertwined with the “Reform and Opening Up” policy. For example, breaking the “iron rice bowl” was a condition in order for China to join the World Trade Organization (Petersen, 2003). At the same time, the cultural ideology of consumption has been generalized. Throwing themselves in this kind of career requires them against the traditional and old-fashioned aspiration of working in state-owned enterprises.

In the era after the “iron rice bowl,” there is still the expectation for the young generation to work in state-owned enterprises where the salary is fixed and there is stability. However, it seems that for some of the young generation, this imitation of the “iron rice bowl” is an obstacle for them to attain more money, lead a better life and move to the upper class. While in their parents’ mind, a path that is similar to the “iron rice bowl” of the past was and is the best choice, as it can receive cradle-to-grave security offered by the state, but in the mind of young generation who grew up in the past three decades alongside the incredible marketization reforms, working in the system means poor efficiency, inflexibility, and much more economic exploitation and oppression than working outside the system (Wang, 2015). Thus, an identity as a worker is less attractive than an identity as a celebrity. The major reason for this is that it seems being a celebrity can earn much more money to satisfy their desire (Figure 3.1.3), while their payment in the system, though stable, never changes. As stardom is commonly represented in the public eye by the media, becoming a celebrity in young generations’ minds is equal to enjoying a lifestyle of the elites.

4.4 What is Good Music?

According to the second chapter, it can be found that the popularity of Chinese talent shows is using the competition system including coaches who are celebrities at the same time. These people have the authority to decide the placement of the

contestants on the show, who is staying, and who is leaving. In other words, these coaches take the responsibility to decide who produced good music and deserve to win. Consequently, while the contestant is being seen as a student, who are supposed to be utterly ignorant of the operational logic of the television and music industry, the celebrity is treated as the cultural expert who is thoroughly familiar with telling the good music from the bad.

During the process of competition, the expectation to be obedient to celebrities who are experienced with the music industry's standards is reinforced continually. On the one side, the shows treat the contestants as amateurs, even though some of them have experience in the industry. On the other side, the shows depict the coaches as professionals. Thereupon, it help the shows to construct dualistic, opposing and unequal power relations (Jian, 2015). For instance, on the show *Sing My Song*, there was an originally traditional Chinese style song "Juan Zhu Lian" written a contestant named Huo Zun. When Huo sang this song in the show, the coach Liu Huan, who is a well-known Chinese singer and songwriter, expressed that he liked the creativity. In later program, Liu recomposed the song into a mainstream and Westernized style, which Huo accepted and sang in the new next episode of the show. Some audiences were reluctant to accept the new edition. To respond the question of why he changed the song, Liu said, "if people learn more about basic music taste, learn how to appreciate good music, I believe that you can obtain more happiness and joy from the music, broaden your horizon, enrich and improve your perception of music" (Wang, 2014). After that, large numbers of articles by netizens appeared on the Internet forum Baidu Tieba that tried to teach common people how to appreciate the new edition, comment on the need to educate the Chinese public in music aesthetics and discuss how to achieve this goal and in order to fulfill Liu's mission. 8 (Yang, 2014).

8 Baidu Tieba (literally: "Baidu Paste Bar") is the largest and most popular Chinese communication platform for discussing all kinds of social events, operated by the Chinese search engine company, Baidu.

In Chinese talent shows, the coaches are not only limited to celebrities who have the talent that contestants are competing in, but can also include celebrities from other fields. Although there is a Chinese proverb saying that “though one might be a master in his own special field, one has no authority in other fields,” talent shows do not plan always obey this traditional wisdom. Because employing celebrities to be coaches is effective for improving audience ratings, some celebrities whose careers have nothing to do with the field of music also end up shouldering an important responsibility of deciding the destiny of contestants. For instance, Zhang Zhiyi, a famous actress, held a position in the Chinese version of the *X Factor* music competition. It seems that as long as the coach is a celebrity, he or she has the authority and influence to decide the contestants who have the talent even he or she seems to have no contact with music in his or her professional life. Consequently, respecting the cultural expertise of celebrities also means that no matter which field he or she come from, as long as he or she is a celebrity, he or she is trusted and has power over non-celebrities. These talent shows establish their judging system on a sense that these celebrities have a better music taste than common people, which often means tastes that are more in line with the mainstream music industry.

Beyond demonstrating knowledge and good taste as connected with celebrity culture, the celebrity coaches also play a role in the reshaping of Chinese aesthetic sense and music styles. In order to make the coaches like their music and choose them to stay in the competition, the contestants have no chance but adjust their style according to coaches’ professional advice.

For a moment, the decision of agreeing with the new edition of “Juan Zhu Lian” does not become a criteria to divide one into “good” or “bad music taste.” And as this phenomenon reflects another aspect of the ideal of meritocracy hiding behind the notion of celebrity — validation of upper-middle class value as meritorious norms to aspire to, which renders working-class cultures as abject (Littler, 2013, p. 55).” In the context of music, this ends up making the Chinese public appreciate Western-style values. Having

a Western style taste means you are well-educated, relating Chinese upper-middle class values to Western values. But as the working-class seldom receive Western culture knowledge, and in the Chinese meritocracy, their tastes are seen as “provincial” tastes that people must aspire to lose (Xiang Tu).

Although I cannot conclusively classify the original edition of the song written by Huo belongs to working class, it has at least aroused the general public’s concern on the definition of high quality taste, and can be described as a representation for class-based cultural clash. The original composition of “Juan Zhu Lian” used Chinese and not Western instruments and arrangement. The point is that when celebrities, such as Liu, are talking about moving upwards and improving people’s music taste, contestants become obedient to celebrities in order to learn how to produce “good music” and audiences also begin fervently discussing or appreciating the celebrities’ ideas on how to appreciate “good music.” This means a normative standard is in everyone’s mind — the “[discourses] of meritocracy ... assume all movement must happen upwards, and in the process contributes to the positioning of working-class cultures as the ‘underclass’, as abject zones and lives to flee from (Littler, 2013, p. 55)”.

Thus, the notion of music taste in the context of Chinese meritocratic celebrity culture is “the positioning of working-class cultures” as something celebrities critique as “abject” taste, and also something contestants are eager to “flee from” (Littler, 2013). Under these circumstances, it is rare to find discussions where people bring up their remembrance of the socialist identity of literature and art workers, which cherish “the positioning of working-class cultures” precisely.

In the end, the idea that contestants should be obedient to celebrities familiar with the operational logic and aesthetic standards of the television and music industry is an ideal defined according to marketability in a neoliberal capitalist system, as well as a Western cultural and economic norm. Everyone wants to flee from “abject” music taste.

As the book *Revolting Subjects* by Imogen Tyler points out, “this is a tendency that has exacerbated under neoliberalism” (quoted from Littler, 2013, p. 55). Indeed, the identity of literature and art worker and its service objects become a part of history, and it seems that few people can or wants to bother remembering it. The television and music industry has neglected the tastes of Mao’s “audiences ... [consisting] of workers, peasants, and soldiers and of their cadres” (Mao, 1942, p.461), and these audiences have even rejected their own tastes gradually. The television and music industry thus run on a market logic from start to finish: they are able to run talent shows perpetually due to the infinite supply of free labor from contestants as performers, which is driven by contestants’ desire to change their social stratum. They plan to do this by adopting the identity of a celebrity, which they think is possible in a neoliberal meritocratic system where individual talents can freely compete in and be rewarded by the market for music, TV or entertainment. There is also a continuous supply of audiences who watch the show and adopt middle-class norms for improving their taste for music or other indications of social status.

Chapter 5.

Can Everyone Have an Equal Chance to Be a Celebrity?

We are building an Aspiration Nation. A country where it's not who you know, or where you're from; but who you are and where you're determined to go. My dream for Britain is that opportunity is not an accident of birth, but a birthright.

— David Cameron

Conservative Party Spring Conference

March 2013 (quoted in Littler, 2013)

5.1 Open Market for Talent

In her essay, *Meritocracy as Plutocracy: The Marketising of "Equality" Under Neoliberalism*, Littler (2013) describes the concept of an "aspiration nation." It is:

a country in which all people, no matter where they're from, have the opportunity to climb the ladder of social mobility. This is the language of meritocracy: the idea that whatever our social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity and mobility for 'talent' to combine with "effort" in order to "rise to the top". (Littler, 2013).

In the opening segment of the 2012 *Voice of China*, Liu Huan says,

"As a good singer, the most basic talent is your voice. The reason why I sit here is to wait for your [contestants'] coming...The voice is the only and the one standard" (Jin, 2012).

Harlem Yu, who a Chinese-Taiwanese singer/songwriter and another coach on *The Voice of China*, adds,

“We do not care about your appearance, age and occupation” (Jin, 2012).

Na Ying, the third coach, says,

“Everything depends on your talent of singing.... We have our backs to the singers, so we have no idea what will happen next.” (Jin, 2012)

Finally, the host of *The Voice of China* says:

“In order to find out [China’s] authentic voice, the real music, each coach will choose his or her favorite singers, then put them as a group. However, this is not an easy thing, as while the singer is singing, the coaches are with their backs to the singers.... Consequently, the voice is the only and the one standard” (Jin, 2012).

The declaration of that the voice is the only standard on the show, and that the appearance, stature and age of the singers do not matter, is quite similar to the notion of “aspiration nation.” It is “[a] country where it’s not who you know, or where you’re from; but who you are and where you’re determined to go” that gives you opportunity to succeed (Littler, 2013, p. 54). The voice, or talent, becomes the tool to assist with achieving social mobility.

With these declarations, talent shows which label themselves as an open stage for common people to achieve their dream and become the next generation of celebrities. What is often emphasized in these shows is that everyone is born with their unique voice. Singing is one of the oldest human skills. Singing is also one of the capabilities that is difficult to replace by technology and machines. Meanwhile, comparing with other skills, singing has important advantages, because it is one of the

most accessible to civilians without many resources. In the past, workers would sing while taking rest after manual labor (Wang, 2015). In post-reform China, as Harvey (2005) points out, “individuals enter the labor market as persons of character ... as individuals who have accumulated various skills (sometimes referred to as ‘human capital’) and tastes (sometime referred to as ‘cultural capital’), and as living beings endowed with dreams, desires, ambitions, hopes, doubts, and fears” (p. 167). In this case, the voice is one of “various skills” that can be employed as human capital. The contestants who have the “good” voice can gain the valuable chance to change their society status.

Meanwhile, with the status of the “iron rice bowl” in doubt in the post-reform period, the endeavors of breaking the iron rice bowl has continued throughout China’s economic development in post-reform decades (Zhao, 2011). According to Harvey (2005):

Flexible labor markets are established. State withdrawal from social welfare provision and technologically induced shifted in job structures that render large segments of the labor in the marketplace. The individualized and relatively powerless worker then confronts a labor market in which only short-term contracts are offered on a customized basis.... A personal responsibility system’ is substituted for social protections (pensions, health care, protections against injury) that were formerly an obligation of the state. (p. 168).

The grassroots needed to explore a new way to make a living in this turbulent society. Accordingly, the value of having a voice lines up with the aspirations of common people.

However, the questions here are whether these young contestants can really achieve their dream though these talent shows. Do those contestants make their desires come true? What is the real situation hidden behind these flashy images of celebrity in the media? What is the larger economic situation behind the “talent” system behind the aura of the successful contestants? Coincidentally, a decade has passed between the

year that the first popular talent show attracted a wide-spread attention (2005), and this current year (2015), when a variety of talent shows has already seized a large portion China's television market. It is high time we asked these questions.

5.2 Epilogues to Contestants' Stories

The followings are representative epilogues to the stories of some of the talent show contestants. Many of these stories come from a series of articles published by *Tencent Entertainment* in 2015, which looks back on the post-talent show lives of contestants in the 10 years since talent shows first became popular in 2005.

5.2.1 Becoming Superstars

The early part of the decade, there were a few contestants who became superstars. For example, Chris Lee Yuchun and Jane Zhang became famous from the 2005 *Super Girls Voice*. After this, both of them became mainstays of the entertainment industry successfully, as they have taken the position of Most Popular Female Artist and Best Female Solo Artist separately for almost 10 years (Lu, 2015). Other famous contestants, such as Shang Wenjie and Tan Weiwei from the 2006 *Super Girls Voice*, have established exclusive fashion labels. Shang Wenjie is recognized as the Queen of Electro Music while Tan Weiwei is recognized as the Queen of Rock Music in China (Lu, 2015). Moreover, Ma Tianyu, Li Yifeng, Jing Boran and Qiao Renliang from the talent show *My Hero* have all become television celebrities or films stars (Lu, 2015; Xiao, 2015).

5.2.2 Becoming “Twice-cooked Meat”: Returning to Competition

“If I cannot success in this year, I will be back next year, over and over again.” This was what Zhang Han, a talent show contestant, told the reporter from *Tencent Entertainment*. He added, “a few days ago when I was watching TV, and just noticed that a person who participated the same talent show with me in those days, was in another talent show again” (Ma, X., Luo, B. He, X. & Xue, J., 2013). Another contestant who has already participated in three or four talent shows told the same reporter that in talent-show contestants’ eyes, participating in a show is the same as gambling. You just have to place the right bet to get fame and everything you want. Moreover, in their mind, they firmly believe that participating in talent shows is the best way to become a famous celebrity.

5.2.3 Developing Parallel Careers

Wang Xiaokun, the winner of 2006 *Lycra My Style My Show*, told *Tencent Entertainment*, “Music-based talent show just likes a recruit agent. It helped me to find a job. Working as a celebrity in entertainment industry is the same as working as an professional athlete. Because the time of this career is very short, normally several years.” Wang now put his main energy on other things to make a living (Ma, X., Luo, B. He, X. & Xue, J., 2013).

“Music is my favorite, no matter how poor I would be, I will never give up singing,” said Xue Zhiqian, who was got his fame in 2005 *Lycra My Style My Show*, to *Tencent*. He started his own hot pot business in order to make money to fund his music dream (Ma, X., Luo, B. He, X. & Xue, J., 2013).

5.2.4 Bowing Out

Si Yang, winner of the Most Popular Contestant award on the 2006 *Lycra My Style My Show*, said to *Tencent*,

“One day you will finally find out that all of the applause and flowers from the dream-like and flashy stages are inauthentic. The only truth is to comfort yourself and lead your family out of poverty. When you realize these, you will make the decision just like me — to stay away [from the entertainment industry]” (Ma, X., Luo, B. He, X. & Xue, J., 2013).

According to *Tencent*, in 2006, due to of his particular and charming stage manners, Si Yang became one the most popular celebrities to come from talent shows. Some industry professionals even described the trend of celebrities created from talent shows as the “Si Yang phenomenon”. But Si Yang’s identity trajectory eventually went from being one of the most popular celebrities, to a faded singer who never put out an album, who was led on by his label who exploited his image until they abandoned him, and then to an owner of an online store. This whole process took less than 4 years.

5.3 A Survey of the Epilogues

Judging from the long-term trend of the past decade, it seems the number of popular celebrities selected from talent shows is limited.

Hunan Satellite Television’s series, *Super & Happy*, has nurtured nine champions in the past decade. *Lycra My Style My Show* has put out six, *My Hero* and *Chinese Idol* put out two, *The Voice of China* and *I Am A Singer* both put out three. It seems the majority of contestants who started their career as a singer from talent shows came from the first two years of the first era of talent shows in the mid-2000s. Chris Lee Yuchun, Jane Zhang, Zhou Bichang, and He Jie all came from the 2005 Super Girls Voice. San Wenjie and Tan Weiwei were the champion and runner-up of 2006 *Super Girls Voice* respectively (Lu, 2015). Besides these, there some contestants who have gotten famous who have participated in these shows more than twice, such as Zhang Jie (the champion of 2004 *Lycra My Style My Show* and the fourth-place winner of 2007

Happy Boy Voice) and Ping An (who has already participated in more than seven shows before becoming famous through *The Voice of China*). As for other contestants, most of them were (semi-) popular during broadcasting, and some of them even released their records successfully. However, when the program ended, the public attention declined rapidly (Jie, 2015).

Each year, a mass of singers get exposure from music-basic talent shows, but audiences only care about their performances in the shows and who would win the title of champion. Few audiences pay any attention to what happens to these contestants after the shows end (Lu, 2015; Jie, 2015). According to *Tencent*, most contestants from talent shows in the past decade have left the entertainment industry.

From the descriptions above, we can divide these contestants into four groups: those who successfully become celebrities with a stable status in the entertainment industry; those who continue to participate in shows in order to become a well-known celebrity; those who choose to set up a separate career in order to balance their music dream with practical needs; and those who give up the dream of being a celebrity, leaving the entertainment industry and going back to lead a normal life (Ma, X., Luo, B. He, X. & Xue, J., 2013; Jian, 2015). It is not difficult for us to find out the fact that the number of the contestants who find fame in talent shows and then turn into a celebrity with a stable status in the entertainment industry smoothly is very small. A significant number of contestants continue to participate in shows, but they are not frequently reported by media (Ma, X., Luo, B. He, X. & Xue, J., 2013). These majority of contestants only gain a chance to enjoy acting as a “D-level reality TV celebrity,” which means these contestants can only be famous for “15 minutes” and “in the sixteenth minute, they are not absorbed into the celebrity system (Collins, 2011, p. 89). Their currency runs out and they are “channeled back into obscurity” (p. 89).

“It seems that the genre talent show destroyed me and a bunch of kids at that time,” said Yu, he champion of 2004 *Super Boys Voice*, to *Tencent*. “Now, to keep participating [in shows] is the only choice for me” (Ma, X., Luo, B. He, X. & Xue, J., 2013). The third group of contestants, who set up parallel careers for their music dream, might be relatively better off than the group of repeat contestants and those who give up the dream (Ma, X., Luo, B. He, X. & Xue, J., 2013). At the same time, this option requires contestants to have the money, connections and resources to invest in a second career (Wang, 2014). From the survey and confessions said by contestants in the above, it can be concluded that although there are a few contestants who turn into celebrities successfully, the majority do not become celebrities.

It is possible that after struggling to put out fascinating performance after fascinating performance, over and over for more than half a year, a common person might receive celebrity-like attention, guidance, and even privileged celebrity lifestyle at the same time. Those who are skilled and lucky enough can rise from the tough competition and become the champion, but even then, becoming a celebrity is still an unattainable dream for the most of contestants. This is the supreme reality of “reality” talent shows. However, the real tragedy of this story is that there are still a lot of reserve common people attempting this “short-cut” to success in the contemporary music marketplace even if the chances are low and the price is to betray their human dignity, like the Chinese father who was reported for trying to sell his little son (Zhu, Lin, Wang & Wan, 2013).

After summarizing these contestants’ experiences, we can make an conclusion that except a few of them, the majority of contestants disappeared from the public eye and may never perform publicly again. But it seems that precedents of these experiences are not enough to convince future contestants to be on guard against these

shows and the unrealistic dreams they sell. There is still a mass of contestants stimulated by shows with slogans like “to sing is my pleasure”⁹ or “my idols”¹⁰.

5.4 What is Equality?

According to economists Milton and Rose Friedman,

“One child is born blind, another with sight. One child has parents deeply concerned about his welfare who provide a background of culture and understanding, another has dissolute, improvident parents. Children at birth clearly do not have identical opportunities in relation to abilities or environment” (quoted in Cooray, 1996, “Equality of Opportunity and Equality of Outcome,” para. 2).

It is true that the stage of talent shows opens in some ways for all who have singing talent. All of these people enjoy the equal *opportunity* to try to achieve their dream. This is the notion of the “equality of opportunity” in the neoliberal market, which means you can gain a value according to your talents. According to Mark Cooray (1996), in *The Australian Achievement: From Bondage To Freedom*:

no arbitrary obstacles should prevent people from achieving those public positions which their talents fit and which their values lead them to seek. Neither birth, nationality, color, religion, sex nor any other equivalent characteristic should determine the public opportunities that are open to a person — only talent and achievement. (“Equality of Opportunity,” para. 4).

This is a familiar idea, considering the description of the judging standards of *The Voice of China* mentioned above. However, we can also read this as a cover for the neoliberal

⁹ Sing as my pleasure is the slogan of Super Voice series.

¹⁰ My idols is the slogan of Chinese Idols.

ideology of meritocracy. This system “endorses a competitive, linear, hierarchical system in which by definition people must be left behind” (Littler, 2011, p. 54).

On the one hand, the identity of celebrity can never exist without a huge number of common people. As a result, there is no chance for every person to raise his or her social status. From Chapter 3, it seems that participating talent shows is a wonderful method to help you move upwards into the social stratum of celebrity, and once you hold a stable position in music industry, you can enjoy a life with luxurious products and gain huge money without the pressures experienced by common people. But in Chapter 4, it uncovers the fact that the fate of contestants is not just limited to the narrative of an ugly duckling becoming a swan:

One of the repeat contestants on talent shows, Ji Jie, told *Tencent*, “when watching talent shows, when I saw there young contestants were tearfully saying they want to realize their music dream, I wanted to slap them, and then tell them, ‘wake up! You can never make it come true though participating talent shows!’”. (Ma, X., Luo, B. He, X. & Xue, J., 2013).

Ji’s words unmask a cruel reality: even though a variety of talent shows have produced large numbers of new “celebrities” and sub-celebrities in music industry, participating in talent shows for most people is less about providing a way for people to pursue their dream than it is to help television and music industry obtain commercial benefits from displaying these people and their talents. The industry can continue to make profits even when most contestants don’t succeed. This verifies Collin’s (2011) criticism that “D-level reality TV celebrity has very real benefits of cultural producers” (p. 90).

The entertainment industry, in fact, is characterized by a “massive earnings disparity and high unemployment for up to 90 percent of its union membership on any given day” (Collins, 2011, p. 90). This is why the coaches of talent shows can earn really big money, as they are all “symbol creators who achieve name recognition in the minds of audience members” (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p. 58). Celebrity “needs to be seen as a

cultural product that is born out of a vast 'reservoir' of cultural workers who are ready to work without wage retainers in which very few 'make it' and whose success is not predictable nor necessarily sustainable" (Collin, 2011, p. 92). Consequently, "[the] poor working conditions and rewards for creative cultural work have been obscured by the fact that in a complex professional era, very generous rewards are available for symbol creators" (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p. 58). In order to become the elite minority, every year, common people who believe that they have the means to win the lottery — their own talent — are stimulated successively by a rags-to-riches story sold by the talent shows. Year after year there are those who decide to give up their ordinary, unromantic and inflexible careers and throw themselves in talent shows, becoming seekers answering to the equality of opportunity in order to chase after their dreams.

Moreover, the logic of celebrities divide people into categories from the top to the bottom. Leaving aside what is the term "talent" represents and who has the authority to define and evaluate it, talent shows uses the concept of "talents" to offer their contestants a "'ladder' system of social mobility", to encourage common people to participate in (Litter, 2011, p. 54). Furthermore, contemporary talent shows take the identity of celebrity to "[promote] a socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest which both legitimizes inequality and damages the structure of community 'by requiring people to be in a permanent state of competition with each other'" (Littler, 2011, p. 54).

Therefore, step by step, the ideal of literature and art worker is diminished in the Chinese consciousness. And the salary and pension system behind this identity — the "iron rice bowl" symbolizing the "Equality of Outcome," the goal of radical socialism — also fades out of public view. As Chinese people have increasingly come to embrace the identity of celebrity, and the neoliberal system is increasingly reinforce the emphasis on individuals' "talents" (the voice), more and more people are inclined to be convinced by that the "equality of opportunity" exists in the market. They start to believe that "all start the race of life at the same time" (Cooray, "Equality," para. 6). As a result, they ignore

that there is another perspective on equality: equality of outcomes, the notion that the system should try to ensure that “everyone finishes at the same time” (para. 6).

In the end, the equality of opportunity notion that supports the ideal of meritocracy is more and more commonly accepted. But in fact, this kind of equality represents superficial fairness. Contestants are little aware about what is the real agenda of television and music industry, or the economic and social reality behind the talent shows. The majority of them fail to notice the fact that television and music industry belong to the commercial entertainment industry, which fosters an environment with massive earnings disparity and unemployment. This means there is no chance for all of them to acquire the identity of celebrity at the same time. With talents — which is itself already defined by the powerful people in the industry — contestants might have an equal opportunity to fight for the identity of celebrity, but there is no equity of outcome. Although all human beings have an individual voice and can employ it as a means for advancing in the system through talent shows, there is no guarantee of success, and never enough celebrity positions for all kinds of voices that deserve them.

Chapter 6.

Conclusion

Music talent shows like *Super Girls Voice* and *The Voice of China* are more than lucrative businesses. In this post-reform China, the genre of talent shows is a marvelous platform to introduce a neoliberal ideal of meritocracy to the Chinese public, especially contestants.

Mao's ideal of literature and art was solely based on the values of working people. It belonged to an ideology of having a closed relationship with working class. In the communist era, the field of literature and art paid more attention to serving the interests, needs and tastes of the working class which constituted and still constitutes the majority of China's population. These people's taste should logically be the mainstream, and in a socialist state, they were designated as the main objects of the state's services. As a socialist occupation, protected by an "iron rice bowl" like all other professions, people working in literature and art gained a stable salary and had social pensions guaranteed by the country. But under the condition of China's social transition, China state broadcasters no longer had subsidies offered by the government.

As a result, these television stations have to transform their operational mechanism into market-oriented economy, in order to adapt to the new circumstance and obtain revenue. Meanwhile, music industry encountered the new technology, Internet. This situation stimulated television and music industry to establish a close relationship with each other to produce market-oriented, audiences-oriented and most importantly, cost-cutting programs in order to maintain advertisers and sponsors. At the same time, the notion of celebrity was legitimated and became a commodity for the entertainment industry to sell and profit from, especially since contestants attracted by the notion of celebrity allowed producers to produce programs at lower cost. The genre of music-basic talent shows takes advantage of this exact situation.

In this paper, contestants who participate in talent have adopted the neoliberal ideal of meritocracy for themselves. If contestants want to be a celebrity, they need to satisfy their coaches, who are famous celebrities belonging to the industry already. They have to obey the rules of the existing game, and at the same time this reinforces and glorifies these rules. Moreover, it seems that Chinese people are normalizing this kind of inequality, as they enthusiastically embraced a show which only requires talents. This seems to promise equality, as everyone has a voice. However, this reveals to another aspect of meritocracy, as “the voice” in this ideology is “mobilized to both disguise and gain consent for the economic inequalities wrought” by the market system (Littler, 2013, p. 69).

As a result of being propagated by the media nationwide, the ideal of meritocracy has gradually become commonplace to Chinese minds. The identity of literature and art worker disappears from the public, which now embraces the identity of celebrity and consent to the ideal meritocracy based in neoliberal ideology. In the long run, it is important for scholars to find out, after all the hubbub has died, what the social questions are left by talent shows, the true social conditions behind these shows, and the social implications of the idea of celebrity.

With a continuing if small number of celebrities picked up from talent shows, an increasing number of audiences have received the ideology as well as the entertainment disseminated by these shows. Or, more radically, all of these contestants and audiences have been re-educated according to an ideology that regards the neoliberal elements embodied in the shows as common sense. The collapse of the identity of literary and art workers reflects more social facts than just the rise of a new name of the profession. From this change, we can understand how pivotal role that the television and music industry play in transforming ideology in post-reform China. There are still numbers of issues that this study fails to take into account, such the relationship between talent shows and competitive individualism, and how the identity of celebrity embodies the

logic of neoliberalism to obscure social symbolical disempowerment. These can become the basis of future studies.

In summary, talent shows are far more than entertainment. Little by little, they are tools that help replace the original revolutionary ideology of socialist China with the ideology of the post-reform neoliberal marketplace. With a variety of marketing and production strategies, they propagate the new ideology until it is finally embodied in the minds of thousands Chinese individuals who aspire to chase their dreams.

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