



Stardom from the perspective of media power: Reproducing media power in the reception of Li Yuchun's stardom

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the stardom of Li Yuchun, a star from *Super Girls' Voice* (an *American Idol*-type show), from the perspective of media power. Based on Couldry's framework of media power, which focuses on the symbolic boundary between the media world and the ordinary world, this study compares the stardom of Song Zuying, who represents party stars; the stardom of Jay Chou, who represents commercialized stars; and the stardom of Li Yuchun to explore the ways in which audiences construct the stardom of Li Yuchun. Their implications for the Chinese entertainment industry and popular culture are also discussed.

Keywords

Chinese popular culture, Chinese star system, media power, stardom, talent show stars

Launched by the Hunan Provincial Television Station (HNTV), *Super Girls' Voice* (hereafter *SGV*) was one of the most successful television entertainment programs in China in 2005. Its audience figures were estimated at more than 200 million (Zhang et al., 2006). The career of the champion of the show, Li Yuchun, is still progressing; in 2010, she was the top earner among Mainland female singers (*Forbes*, 2010).

As a talent show, *SGV* was regarded as a successful model for creating stars in 2005. One representative opinion was that *SGV* marked the beginning of an era in which stars

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were made from ordinary people (Hou, 2005; Sun and Zhang, 2005). Previous studies of this issue are detailed and inspirational, but these discussions have taken one assumption for granted: that the show really made stars. This argument could only be convincing after the show. If *SGV* really made stars, was any audience power involved in the reception of stars from *SGV* or other talent shows? What does this phenomenon mean for China's current star system? This issue, unfortunately, has not received attention in previous studies. There are few explorations similar to the analysis of star creation in *Pop Idol* (Holmes, 2004) within the Chinese media context. The unproven assumptions and the lack of empirical studies, particularly from Mainland China, inspire the present study.

This study examines the stardom of Li Yuchun to explore the consumption of stars from *SGV*. Li Yuchun was the champion of *SGV* in 2005 and attracted the majority of media attention and the largest number of audience votes (Hartley, 2008). Thus Li Yuchun provides a good subject for the examination of audience power (Meng, 2009).

The research questions in this study include the audience's recognition of Li Yuchun's stardom and the impact of the way she became a star (as the result of a talent show) on her star status and the consumption of her stardom. The term 'star' refers here to a status that exhibits particular charisma and power (Couldry, 2000; Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001). The effect of audience power on the consumption of her stardom, compared with the consumption of other stars, is another issue that this study examines.

Without exploring media power, it is difficult to accurately evaluate the actual status and position of Li Yuchun and what this position means in the media world because the show involved the negotiation and reproduction of symbolic media power (Cui and Lee, 2010). Thus, Couldry's (2000) media power framework is appropriate for this study, which will also discuss the consumption of other stars created in traditional ways in China's music industry.

Media power

This study addresses media power issues in the consumption of Li Yuchun's stardom. Li Yuchun and other *SGV* contestants (Super Girls) achieved their fame through *SGV*, a talent show, which is a subgenre of 'reality TV'. Similar to other media phenomena, the rise of reality TV can be examined by focusing on its commercial imperatives (Fairchild, 2004), technological applications (Andrejevic, 2004), textual politics (Bell-Jordan, 2008), and audience reception (Hartley, 2004). As some studies have indicated, the rise of talent shows such as *SGV* in China has its roots in the changing political economy of Chinese media (Cui and Lee, 2010). However, a political economy analysis of *SGV* cannot offer a comprehensive view of the stardom of Li Yuchun or other Super Girls. Hence, this article turns to Couldry's (2000) media power framework to address this problem.

In media effects studies, media power is seen as the influence of the media on an audience's attitudes and activities, individually and collectively (e.g. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976; Feilitzen, 1994; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). This behavioral approach, however, simplifies media power into a matter of media effects (Couldry and Curran, 2003; Gitlin, 1978; Hall, 1988), fails to explain the

complexity of exercising power and ignores the struggles of diverse social groups (Gitlin, 1978; Hall, 1988).

The tendency to overlook the interests and struggles of diverse social groups in the media effects approach is remedied by the political economy approach. Grounded in the Marxist tradition, this approach focuses on the process and the subject of media power manipulations (Curran et al., 1988), such as studies on the ownership and control of the media (Garnham, 1990; Murdock, 1988). However, this approach may ignore the power of media institutions themselves and the audience's subjectivity (Couldry and Curran, 2003).

The third approach considers media power as a kind of social power and emphasizes the importance of the media's representational power. This approach is grounded in the concept of symbolic power in sociology (e.g. Bourdieu, 1991), which emphasizes symbolic power in the construction of reality and the naturalization of ideology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Couldry, 2003).

Symbolic media power

Symbolic media power refers to the power of the media to naturalize ideology or the social order (Hall, 1988). Different from the political economy approach, this approach views media power as a kind of social power with its own independence and subjectivity (Couldry and Curran, 2003). This study adopts Couldry's (2000) framework, which follows this approach as its theoretical framework. For Couldry, media power is defined as 'the concentration in media institutions of the symbolic power of "constructing reality"' (2000: 4). He suggests that media power uses naming, framing and ordering in the media's manipulation of reality. Naming refers to the media's authority to designate things as social facts, and framing refers to the media's role as the most important window through which people access the social world. These two facets of media power have been highlighted by many media sociologists (e.g. D'Angelo, 2002; Gitlin, 1980; Entman, 1993; Pan and Kosicki, 2001).

However, the most original part of Couldry's analysis is the discussion of ordering. Ordering refers to the construction and reproduction of the division between the media world and everyday life (Couldry, 2000). The former is seen as extraordinary, inhabited by celebrities and other media people who are seen as somehow better and more special than ordinary people (Couldry, 2000). The everyday world, in contrast, is mundane and inhabited by common people (Couldry, 2000). Although audience members may not believe everything they receive from specific media outlets, program content or media practices, people in modern society generally trust the media and legitimate this media/ordinary distinction.

Nevertheless, the distinction between the media world and the ordinary world is not stable. Possibilities for contesting this symbolic power lie not only in the new ways of producing or distributing media products but also in new ways of media consumption (Couldry, 2003). Couldry's framework explains how the two diverse worlds meet each other, such as celebrities appearing on reality TV shows or in studio tours of audiences, and the media's power of negotiation and reproduction in these types of meetings

(Couldry, 2000). Therefore, this framework is suitable for this study on a talent show star who transformed from an ordinary person.

Stardom

Before beginning our analysis, it is necessary to review previous works that have explored the roots of star power and the role of stars in the power structure. Although celebrities can be viewed as products of cultural processes, commodities, social relations (Turner, 2004), a form of 'rationalization' (Marshall, 1997: 52), a sign or a text (Dyer, 1998; Ellis, 1992), or an expression of 'audience-subjectivity' (Marshall, 1997: 52), each of these perspectives represents a separate research approach in this field. Only when stars are viewed as media processes, or 'cultural formations' (Turner, 2004: 9), can the concentration of the media's symbolic power on stars be demonstrated in a way that explains the roots of star power differently from the political economy approach or traditional cultural studies (Couldry, 2000; Litter, 2004). Thus, this study adopts the last perspective in an attempt to explore the relationship between pop stars and multiple powers in China.

With regard to the issue of the roots of star power, Marshall (1997) explained that star power involves the way in which stars or celebrities are constructed by the industry and the audience. Marshall (1997) classified the construction of celebrities into the categories of film celebrities, television celebrities and music celebrities. These categories consider the media specificities on which diverse audience-celebrity relationships are based. Film stars, for instance, are construed mainly by their extraordinariness and distance from the audience (Marshall, 1997), which separates them from ordinary people and makes them unique (Dyer, 1998; Gamson, 1994). The coverage of stars' ordinariness is an accessory to their stardom (Dyer, 1998; Ellis, 1992). In contrast to film stars, the construction of television stars is mainly dependent on familiarity and intimacy with the audience (Marshall, 1997). Thus, ordinariness becomes the primary tool to build intimacy between television stars and audiences (Ellis, 1992). Likewise, the construction of music celebrities is mainly dependent on authenticity, difference and close relationships to the audience (Marshall, 1997).

Although this classification focuses excessively on the media specificity and ignores the diversity of stars or celebrities, such as cross-over stars or musical stars who are mainly constructed by extraordinariness, it explains why reality TV is likely to construct stardom for its contestants – who are mostly ordinary people – by emphasizing their realness and ordinariness (Holmes, 2004; Reijnders et al., 2007). It also explains why, in addition to the emphasis on ordinariness, the main aspect of the current construction of stars through talent shows is the emphasis on the way stardom is produced, which generates closeness and intimacy between the audience and the contestants (Holmes, 2004). This visibility of the star production process is believed to threaten the construction of stardom in the film industry (according to which stars are born not made) and the naturalization of fame because it destroys fans' fantasies (Ellis, 1992; Gamson, 2001).

Nevertheless, there are diverse opinions on whether intimacy with the reality TV production process implies the democratization of stardom (e.g. Gamson, 2001; Holmes,

2004; Turner, 2004, 2006). The stability of the star status of celebrities or talent show stars is regarded as questionable because their stardom is dependent on the platform that produces them (Turner, 2004, 2006).

Turning to the role stars play in the power structure, from the perspective of the Frankfurt School, stardom is a tool of the modern cultural industry to maintain the status quo (Marshall, 1997). However, this perspective overlooks the complexity of popular culture and the subjectivity of the audience (Marshall, 1997). Stars might maintain the status quo through the ‘humanization of institutions’, may become a ‘stable configuration of collective formation’ (Marshall, 1997:244), or may represent freedom and accessibility in culture (Marshall, 1997). Therefore, an analysis of the role of stars in the power structure should be contextualized to ensure its accuracy.

These previous works have inspired this study to examine Li Yuchun’s stardom, the power relationships behind diverse stars in China and their role in the power structure.

Fandom

There are three categories of audiences: fans, anti-fans and non-fans (Gray, 2008). Among these three groups, fans are most involved in their media consumption and attract considerable attention. Before the 1980s, fans were viewed as deviants because they constitute a special group that is addicted to certain texts (Gray, 2008; Pullen, 2004), and they rely on the consumption of certain texts to construct their own identities, genders or moralities (Darling-Wolf, 2004; Einerson, 1998). These stereotypes of fans, however, were challenged from the late 1980s by many works because they not only ignore fans’ power and the importance of consumption but also normalize non-fans (Gray, 2008; Hills, 2002).

In previous text-centered approaches to cultural studies, fans’ power was depicted as resistance through the process of media consumption to the dominant ideology embedded in popular culture texts (Fiske, 1992). With the exception of criticism of Fiske’s discussions as naïve (Gray, 2008), fandom studies need to focus beyond text. Therefore, scholars tend to focus on fans’ emotional investment in or experience with the objects of fandom, called ‘affective power’ (Gray, 2008: 56), instead of simply focusing on the “‘reading” of text’ (Hills, 2002: 60). Fans’ fantasies, for example, should be re-evaluated because they may allow us to rethink or even challenge the logic of the real world (Gray, 2008; Hills, 2002). However, fan consumption, even as a symbol of consumerism and individualism, may have democratic implications in certain media contexts, such as in Mainland China (Fung, 2009).

In addition to fans’ consumption, fans’ activities may have political potential, although there are diverse opinions on the value of this political potential (e.g. Fung, 2009; Jones, 2003; Zoonen, 2009). Fans’ activities may be helpful in fostering citizenship (Gray, 2008). *SGV* fans, for instance, protested against what they saw as HNTV’s manipulation of SMS voting in 2005 (Keane et al., 2007). Likewise, the collective actions of Jay Chou’s fans in Tiananmen Square remind us of this possibility. Thus, it might be timely to evaluate the effect of fandom on stardom rather than focusing on stars’ influence on fans, particularly in the case of Li Yuchun (e.g. Zhang, 2007).

The coexistence of diverse types of stars and their power relationships

In China, the earliest 'stars' emerged in the 1930s in Shanghai, where Chinese popular culture had been developing for some time (Chen, 2011). From 1949 to 1978, stars could not exist in Mainland China because the party-state combined cultural production and consumption with communist ideology (Jones, 1994). After 1978, the introduction of Deng's economic reforms and the open-door policy allowed celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan to be presented in Mainland China. To respond to the influence of Hong Kong and Taiwan music styles, the government began to develop state-run popular music in the mid 1980s. This development led to mainstream popular music (Jones, 1994), which produced local pop stars such as Mao A'min and Liu Huan in Mainland China (Baranovitch, 2003; Chen, 2011). In addition to pop stars, the party-state produced party stars such as Dong Wenhua¹ as propaganda tools to resist the influence of outsiders. The term 'party stars' is used in this study to refer to stars who are propaganda tools of party ideology and who achieve a personal reputation and economic returns at the same time.²

After 1989, with market reform and weakening ideological control over cultural production and consumption (Baranovitch, 2003; Jones, 1994; Saich, 1994), non-state capital entered into music production and circulation and spurred the emergence of market-oriented recording companies, the maturity of the commercialized show market (Jin, 2002) and commercialized stars.

From the late 1990s into the early 21st century, the disarray of copyright law in Mainland China and the decline in recording companies' profits led to a lack of new stars in the system, which left spaces for a new model of star production: making stars from talent shows. The fame of Li Yuchun might represent another kind of star, talent show stars, who coexist with other stars in the star system of China's music industry.

Currently, party stars, commercialized stars and talent show stars constitute the mainstream of the star system in Mainland China's music industry, although many other types of stars coexist in this system. Each type of star has its own resources and limitations resulting from negotiations and conflicts with multiple powers. Party stars mainly depend on state power. They primarily sing patriotic or state-sanctioned songs that promote government messages and are rewarded with political status as special state staff, media exposure (particularly on CCTV) and music awards (Baranovitch, 2003; Fung, 2009). However, for party stars, there is always a negotiation between state power and media power. State-sponsored galas and concerts often limit the number of party stars on stage and attempt to reserve time for certain commercialized stars (*Dahebao*, 2002) because the younger generation has little interest in party stars and party ideologies (Fung, 2009). Party stars' lack of creativity in musical styles and performance also contributes to this situation (Baranovitch, 2003). Commercialized stars mainly rely on media power, but they must also conform to state power to some degree, such as partial cooperation with the party-state in return for media resources (Baranovitch, 2003).

Talent show stars can be divided into those who emerged prior to the voting procedure change in September 2007 (which prohibited audience voting) and those who emerged after this change (Xinhua Net, 2007).³ Talent show stars (before 2007) who were selected

by general audiences, such as Li Yuchun, are products of both media and audience power, whereas talent show stars introduced after September 2007 are the products of media power that conforms to state power.

However, state power has also negotiated with media power and audience power in this process to a limited degree. After 2005, CCTV expanded the scope of its talent shows by upgrading *Star Avenue* and producing original talent shows, such as *China's Good Song* (*Zhongguo haogequ*),⁴ with a foreign production company to promote new talent. CCTV also permitted stars from talent shows aired by provincial television stations to perform in the Spring Festival Eve Television Gala, such as the winner of the 2013 *Happy Boy's Voice* (*Kuaile nansheng*) (Netease, 2014).⁵ These concessions were made not only because state power is not stable and united but also because of the financial aspirations of media institutions, including CCTV, and the need to attract young audiences.

To address the possible differences in audiences' consumption of the three types of stars in China's music industry, this article uses Song Zuying⁶ as a representative of party stars and Jay Chou⁷ as a representative of commercialized stars and compares them with Li Yuchun, who represents talent show stars before 2007.

Methodology

This study used a focus group approach to explore audience responses to Song Zuying, Jay Chou and Li Yuchun's stardom and the general construction of stardom. Focus groups are useful because interviewees can describe their feelings about Li Yuchun and other stars using ordinary words that embody symbolic authority to some degree (Couldry, 2000).

This article used a sample in Chongqing, recruiting undergraduate students at Southwest University, partly through the author's social relationships. More importantly, although Chongqing was not a city in which an *SGV* district elimination contest was held, it was located in the Chengdu contest district in 2005, which was one of the most successful districts.⁸ There were many fans of Super Girls in Chongqing, and Chongqing is one of 12 central cities where rating data were collected and analysed by CVSC-Sofres Media (CSM), a joint venture in audience research by CCTV and Taylor Nelson Sofres.⁹ According to CSM, *SGV*'s viewing rating in Chongqing was 12.3 per cent in August 2005 and was fourth highest among the 12 cities with rating data (Cui and Lee, 2010).

The 36 volunteers were divided into nine four-person groups. The group discussions ranged from one hour and forty minutes to two hours in length. Data collection began on 10 June 2010 and was completed by late June of the same year.

The stardom of party stars in the eyes of the audience

The discussants spoke of the star status of the party star with respect because they assumed that party stars have extraordinary musical abilities. For instance, they ranked the star status of Song Zuying higher than that of Li Yuchun because they thought the latter's stardom had only been attained through a lucky break:

*D4*¹⁰

(interrupting): For me, if they all stood in front of me, I would think that Song Zuying was worthy of respect Because I know about her background, which shows she waded into her career development, and she is well-educated ... her background makes me respect her. [...] However, this is not the case for Li Yuchun and Zhang Liangying.¹¹ They became well known as ordinary people, just like us. What I miss might be just that opportunity. [...] It does not mean I do not respect them. It means that they are closer to us than other stars [...]

Nevertheless, the discussants knew about the party stars' propaganda responsibilities and showed little interest in their patriotic songs:

G1: ... Young people love popular culture. Song Zuying sings very well, but nobody ... loves her songs with their heart. That kind of feeling is ... [it is] not hate anyway, [but it is] not true love either.

The discussants also knew the exact ideological controls behind the production of party stars, such as CCTV's Spring Festival Eve Gala and the Young Singer Contest. They showed indifference to this ideological control in the production of party stars.

D3: Anyway, I think Song Zuying is better [than stars from *SGV*]. But she's got support, too. Where is the support from? The Spring Festival Gala! [...] She presents at the gala every year, which is decided by her identity. It seems ... she ranks highest in military position among vocalists, as a ... general or something ...

Despite their indifference to the patriotic songs of party stars and party ideology, the discussants demonstrated respect for Song Zuying's stardom. Their construction of Song Zuying's stardom was similar to 'admiring identification', which is central to the construction of film stars (Marshall, 1997: 187), in which audiences construct stars as superior to them. However, this admiration and respect for party stars lacks emotional investment from the audience and conveys the coexistence of the 'affective power' of the audience (Gray, 2008: 56) and their negotiation with state power and media power.

The stardom of commercialized stars in the eyes of the audience

The stardom of commercialized stars was also acknowledged by the discussants. For example, Jay Chou had fans in each of the focus groups. His stardom was recognized by the discussants with full respect based on their belief in the extraordinariness of his musical ability.

D2: It is ... the creativity [that makes stars], in my view. [...] I love those stars who are capable of writing ... writing songs, such as Jay Chou ... he has stood out from 2000 till now. [...] While ... this is not the case for Li Yuchun, since she does not write her songs, does she?

For these young discussants, Jay Chou, as a commercialized star, has constructed his extraordinariness based on his musical ability, which is difficult for followers to surpass and confirms his stardom.

- B1: The style of Jay Chou could only be copied rather than surpassed, while for Li Yuchun, there are so many followers, a bunch of people with passionate interests, who attempt to surpass her just like flies around sour food.

In fact, Jay Chou has also successfully constructed 'ordinariness' for young audiences. Because of his extraordinary musical ability, the ease with which his songs can be sung motivates more fans to copy his songs and reinforces his stardom rather than deconstructing it. The discussants' construction of Jay Chou's stardom was similar to 'admiring identification' (Marshall, 1997:187), as in their construction of Song Zuying's stardom. However, the difference was that their admiration and respect for Jay Chou included an emotional investment.

The stardom of Li Yuchun in the eyes of the audience

The majority of discussants said that Li Yuchun was definitely a star. Their reasons mainly included her popularity and social influence on fashion.

- B4: For instance, everyone knows her. [All laugh.] [...] For me, it is unfair not to count a well-known person all around the country as a star.

However, most of them claimed that she was a 'B-lister' in the pop industry, with less social influence than the top stars on the A-list, who are supposed to have a strong social influence on audiences as a sign of their symbolic power. As one discussant said, Li Yuchun did not have as much 'glamour' even though they admitted she was a star.

- C3: The A-listers show up with glamour ... [and] many people with diverse backgrounds and ages are glad to see you. [...] Taking Li Yuchun as an example, not all audiences love her, which means she is not on the A-list, not as those ... just without that kind of glamour.

There might be multiple reasons for the idea that Li Yuchun's stardom is not as good as that of top stars in the music industry, such as her musical ability or personal style, which has clear gender characteristics. The point of our analysis is not her actual rank but the way the discussants construct her stardom. In subsequent sections, we will analyse why these discussants placed her in this category and what this category means for the discussants.

'Her style is easily copied': ordinary 'extraordinariness'

One of the reasons that the discussants thought that Li was a B-lister was that some of them believed that Li Yuchun was not extraordinary. Some emphasized that her personal style and image, including her gender characteristics, were extraordinary but were easily copied.

G2: Li Yuchun. She probably ... has formulated a style now, and everyone is ... likely to copy the style and mimic her. [...] But her style is easily copied and surpassed.

Because Li Yuchun's extraordinariness is easily copied and surpassed, for some discussants, her fame lacked symbolic power, which helped to construct a hierarchical boundary between her and them. This boundary is significant for the construction of traditional stars, similar to film stars (Gray, 2008).

'She is a normal girl': the ordinariness of Li Yuchun

The ordinariness of Li Yuchun's musical ability was mentioned by the discussants, who panned her songs and concerts as shallow and dull. This type of ordinariness also reminded the discussants that the status of Li's stardom was not as high as that of other stars, who had more 'extraordinary' musical ability.

B1: [...] She is a normal girl and has nothing extraordinary... [...] [It seems like] 'I have diverse features, although none of them is extraordinary. But your work can be better than mine in only one respect, not all [...].'

The discussants' emphasis on Li's ordinariness confirmed that, as Gray (2008) mentioned, the construction of television celebrities is mainly dependent on ordinariness. They put Li's stardom at a lower hierarchical level than that of 'achievement stars' (Rojek, 2001) or even of other talented talent stars, such as Zhang Liangying.

Rapid 'star' creation in SGV and its influence on the stardom of Li Yuchun

When the discussants were asked how they felt when they compared Li Yuchun with stars who were chosen in traditional ways, some said the differences were a matter of different styles. Some discussants, however, contended that the greatest difference between Li Yuchun and other pop stars was in the way they became stars. For the discussants, the issue was that Li Yuchun attained her stardom too quickly:

C2: I mean, they've got their fame too quickly. They went up the hill very fast. Well, I think everything ... everything needs a process. [...]

For these discussants, the rapid pace of *SGV* and other talent shows made it difficult for them to respect Li Yuchun's stardom and that of other talent show stars because they attributed their fame to luck.

D1: Of course, Li Yuchun did something good for this society. But, you know, as he [D3] said, if I got that big break, I might ... or might not ... I might have an even better career than hers.... That is why I cannot respect her too much or look at her with admiration.

For most discussants, their identification with Li Yuchun was similar to ‘associative identification’, which breaks the media/ordinary boundary between stars and audiences (Gray, 2008). This boundary breaking, however, might partly influence Li Yuchun’s power for some discussants; it demonstrates their belief in the media/ordinary boundary and the reproduction of media power in their consumption of Li Yuchun.

Meanwhile, some discussants did not think that Li and other talent show stars were different from stars made in the traditional way. The coexistence of diverse types of discussants remind us that opinions regarding audience agency in the consumption of talent show stars that are overly optimistic or overly pessimistic are not acceptable. A careful analysis of the new possibilities embodied in audience constructions of Li Yuchun is needed.

Troubled closeness

For the discussants, another difference between Li Yuchun or the other *SGV* talent show stars and other stars was the audience’s closeness to the production of the stardom. Many discussants talked about the entire process of how Li Yuchun and other Super Girls became stars on the show, and observed that it had seldom happened before. For some, this closeness helped them become fans of the Super Girls, including Li Yuchun. For others, however, this was not the case. Some discussants mentioned that they preferred distance from this production process because the closeness affected their understanding of the stars’ ‘true selves’ as conveyed by the media.

- E3: For me ... I prefer ... relatively ... prefer not to watch the whole process of how their stardom is produced.
- E3: From the beginning, we liked Jay Chou because of his songs, and then we learned about him step by step, through his music and his true self, constructed by what he shows in public. If we had watched how he developed his career gradually, it would be hard to determine ... which side of him was [true].

Some discussants noted that this closeness might lead to a strict moral evaluation of *SGV* stars. One volunteer mentioned that she could not forgive the sex scandal of one Super Girl, but that it was perfectly acceptable for similar affairs to happen with stars who were constructed in the traditional way.

This ‘troubled’ closeness (Couldry and Markham, 2008: 5) is similar to the threat to fame that was discussed by Ellis (1992) and Gamson (2001), and indicates the sustainable distance between ordinary people and media people. This distance represents the symbolic boundary between the media and the ordinary world as constructed by the audience (Couldry, 2000). Although the discussants did not focus on Li Yuchun, they talked about stars from *SGV* and other talent shows. Their comments suggest that, for some audiences, this sense of closeness might have negative effects on the perception of the stardom of stars from *SGV* and other talent shows.

The meaning of Li Yuchun’s stardom: another kind of star

For many discussants, their construction of Li Yuchun’s stardom as a B-lister was mainly dependent on her ordinariness and her unimpressive extraordinariness. In addition to their

classification of Li Yuchun's stardom as a B-lister, it should be noted that many discussants broadened the meaning of stars. For instance, one girl mentioned that Li should be 'another' kind of star with more social contributions than music achievements.

- D4: [Li Yuchun] is a pop star. However, she might be the [kind of] star whose social contributions are more impressive [than her musical ability].
- D4: [...] No matter [her] appearance, clothing or her voice.... [Everything] ... seems ... to challenge [traditional gender classifications]. That is one of her contributions. [...] Talking about her musical ability ... it is not so impressive for me [smiles].

If voting for Li Yuchun, with the 'least ability to carry a tune', on *SGV* is democracy (Hartley, 2008:146), the audience's refinement of the category of 'stars' by placing this girl with less musical ability and more social contributions into 'another' category of stars challenges the normalization of stars (stars should have extraordinary musical ability, such as Song) and symbolic media power (Gray, 2008), and expresses the audience's agency and recognition of audience power. Nevertheless, this refinement also involves the audience's negotiation with media power.

For some discussants, the intimacy created by the talent show and the 'success myth' (Holmes, 2004:156) were not helpful to Li's stardom. However, other discussants believed that intimacy and the success myth on the show were helpful for their construction of Li's stardom. Some discussants thought that as a star rising from the ordinary, her stardom challenged the media/ordinary boundary and implied the democratization of fame, as Gamson (2001) discussed.

- I2: Before, we always thought that stars seem to be superior to us. Since they succeeded [in] becoming stars, it seems everyone can [do it if they try].
- B1: [...] Li Yuchun stands out from the ordinary, which means the mass [Other discussants interrupt: [The mass has] got a chance!] Yeah, [it] means everyone's got a chance. [...] That is the difference between Super Girls and [other stars].]

In conclusion, the discussants' modification of their idea of what a star is, and the democratic implications of Li's stardom for some discussants remind us that audience power might be mixed with subordination to or negotiation of media power, and requires careful analysis.

Discussion

Based on Couldry's (2000) theoretical framework of media power, this study focuses on Li Yuchun's stardom. The question of the meaning of Li Yuchun's stardom for young audiences and the way audiences construct the relationship between themselves and Song Zuying (representative of party stars), Jay Chou (representative of commercialized stars) and Li Yuchun (representative of talent show stars) are also examined in this article.

First, the data show that the discussants recognized the stardom of Song Zuying and Jay Chou. Their construction of the stardom of Song Zuying and Jay Chou was mainly

dependent on the extraordinariness of their musical ability and an 'admiring identification' that put these stars in a superior position to themselves (Gray, 2008: 187). This construction reproduces the media/ordinary boundary and media power, and shows little resistance to the state power behind party stars. However, their admiration of Song Zuying lacked emotional investment, which shows their 'affective power' (Gray, 2008: 56), such as their indifference to party ideology and state power.

Second, the data show that the discussants recognized Li Yuchun's stardom but classified her stardom as that of a B-lister because they constructed her stardom based on her ordinariness and her unimpressive extraordinariness. The discussants' classification of Li Yuchun as a 'B-lister' indicates that, although they granted Li Yuchun less power, they also refined the simple category of 'stars' and placed stars with less musical ability and more social contributions, such as Li Yuchun, into another category that challenged the normalization of stars (stars should have extraordinary musical ability) and symbolic media power.

Furthermore, the discussants' identification of Li Yuchun is similar to 'associative identification' (Gray, 2008:193), which puts Li Yuchun in an equal position with them and breaks the media/ordinary boundary. This identification has double meanings for the discussants. On the one hand, for some discussants it might partly influence Li Yuchun's power, so they have less respect for Li Yuchun's stardom. In addition, the intimacy created by talent shows between the Super Girls and the audience became a threat to the talent show stars' fame, as discussed by Ellis (1992) and Gamson (2001). All of these phenomena confirm their belief in the media/ordinary boundary and the reproduction of media power in their consumption of Li Yuchun's stardom (Couldry, 2000). However, for other discussants, this identification and Li's stardom have democratic implications and challenge the media/ordinary boundary. Therefore, it might be difficult to evaluate whether the reproduction of media power is stronger than audience resistance here, because they coexist.

In addition, the exclusion of voting and other limitations on talent shows made by the government (Xinhua Net, 2007) confirm the show's potential challenge to state power and media power (Cui and Lee, 2010). At the individual level, Li Yuchun's stardom also has implications for the current star system and power structure. Her stardom disrupted the dominance of party stars and commercial stars, and she has maintained high popularity. Her acceptance by the 2015 Spring Festival Gala of CCTV (Zhou and Zhao, 2015) also represented a negotiation between the party-state and audience power. However, since the cancellation of voting in talent shows after 2007, further analysis is needed of the degree to which talent show stars threaten media power and state power in Mainland China.

Finally, the limitations of this study and the power-centered approach must be clarified. Because this study is mainly based on Couldry's framework (2000), it focuses on the issue of power. This power-centered approach is helpful for our analysis of the power relationship of stardom, but it presumes a subordinate position for the audience and offers little space for their subjective construction of stars (Gibson, 2007). Furthermore, this approach might neglect the dynamics of the audience construction of meaning, identity or relationships between the audience and stars because popular culture practices are more complex than simple resistance (Gibson, 2007). This study has attempted to address this issue, but further studies may be needed.

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Notes

1. A singer who became well known for singing 'The bright color of blood' (xueran de fengcai), which praises the sacrifices made by soldiers for the country. When Dong sang these songs (1984), China was at war with Vietnam (the third period of the war with Vietnam).
2. The term 'party star' is inspired by terms used in works on Chinese media under the control of the party-state (Lee et al., 2007; Tong and Sparks, 2009).
3. The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) in China issued restrictions on the timing, content and judging choices of talent shows in September 2007 and, importantly, prohibited the use of audience voting (Xinhua Net, 2007).
4. *China's Good Song* (*Zhongguo haoqegu*) is an original talent show designed to promote Chinese pop music that began to air on CCTV in 2014 and that is produced by CCTV and the Pal Edward culture and communication company controlled by News Cooperation.
5. *Happy Boy's Voice* (*Kuaile nansheng*) is the upgraded boy version of *Super Girls' Voice* (*Chaoji nvsheng*) produced by HNTV, which first aired in 2007.
6. Song Zuying is a well-known Chinese folk music singer who currently works as the associate head of China's Navy Political Department Song and Dance Troupe (*zhongguo renmin jiefangjun haijun zhengzhibu gewutuan*). Her most popular songs include 'Love My China' (*aiwo zhonghua*).
7. Jay Chou is a well-known pop star in Taiwan and has many fans in Mainland China.
8. Two of the top three Super Girls came from Chengdu district, including the champion, Li Yuchun.
9. See 'Achievements' section in 'Superbrands case studies: Taylor Nelson Sofres', <http://www.brandrepublic.com/article/158143/superbrands-case-studies-taylor-nelson-sofres>
10. 'R' represents the researcher, here and hereafter. For the focus group participants, the letter represents the focus group they attended, with the number standing for a specific person. 'G3', for example, indicates the third person in Group G. All interviews were translated by the author and proofread by the proofreader.
11. Zhang Liangying was the runner-up of *SGV* in 2005 and is a pop star in Mainland China.

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