

“Diversifying” masculinity: super girls, happy boys, cross-dressers, and real men on Chinese media

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Abstract: Because of “commercialization without independence,” representations of many groups still adhere to social norms, despite superficial diversity on Chinese TV today. One of the most compelling examples of such conformity is the representation of different masculinities. Female masculinity, feminized masculinity, male cross-dressers, and hyper masculinity help to create a dazzling landscape on Chinese TV. After examining the containment, co-option, and regulation of “unconventional” masculinities by the mainstream media and authorities, I argue that Chinese media have created a discourse in which marginalized masculinity and hyper masculinity coexist. The former exists only in newer and less serious genres, and the latter has evolved and become more compelling in the older and more traditional genres, resulting in a skillful reinforcement of mainstream cultural norms and values concerning masculinity, while appearing to do the opposite.

Keywords Masculinity; Chinese Television; Commercialization of Media; Gender Norms; Patriarchy; Youth

INTRODUCTION

Although there is rich scholarly work being done on masculinity in Chinese history, literature, magazines, and television dramas, masculinity as depicted in the wider array of genres of TV programming has not yet been fully explored, even though multiple genres play important roles in the media competition complex and contribute to the implicit representation of masculinities. In this paper I focus on masculinity as represented in popular reality TV shows, comic sketches, and TV dramas (Dianshi Ju) in the past 10 years: the 2005 *Super Female Voice* singing competition, the 2007 and 2010 *Happy Male Voice* singing competitions, the comedian dubbed as “dirty” by the Chinese media, and the “true/real” men repeatedly portrayed in the Chinese media.

In its detailed examination of the techniques that contemporary Chinese media have used in the representation of different masculinities, this article applies Stuart Hall’s view on culture studies: “How things are represented and the ‘machineries’ and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive* and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event role” (Hall 1996, 443). By examining the containment, co-option, and regulation of “unconventional” masculinities by the mainstream media and authorities, I argue that Chinese media have created a discourse in which marginalized masculinity and hyper masculinity coexist. This coexistence is self-consciously constructed through various TV genres by Chinese TV stations. Marginalized masculinity exists only in newer and less serious genres, mainly reality TV and short skits by young comedians, while hyper masculinity has evolved and become more compelling in the older and more traditional genres, mainly TV dramas, resulting in a skillful reinforcement of mainstream cultural norms and values concerning masculinity.

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BACKGROUND: TELEVISION IN CHINA

Since the 1980s the media industry, like other industries in China, has experienced reform and rapid development. The reform has transformed China's media policy from propaganda to hegemony and from domination to compromise, resulting in more formal and regularized control and censorship, while granting the media "commercialization without independence" (J. Chan 1993; A. Chan 2002; Yu 2009). The commercialization of television stations, along with the rest of the media industry, including television production companies, has brought Chinese audiences round-the-clock television programming. As a result, every genre of program has increased in number.

Currently, the Chinese TV market can be roughly divided into programs labeled as more realistic or serious (mainland Chinese news and education programs); TV dramas aimed at providing education and protecting dominant values (Center of Chinese TV Production of Chinese Central TV); TV dramas for pure entertainment (South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United States, and other overseas producers; independent companies in mainland China; and provincial satellite TV stations' production departments); entertainment shows (Hunan Satellite TV, Shanghai TV, other provincial TV stations, and some Chinese Central TV/ CCTV¹ programs); lifestyle programs (such as cooking shows); and other programs (either produced by mainland media producers or imported knowledge and education programs, such as travel shows from the United States or Europe). This expansion has brought about cultural pluralism. The array of people shown on television has become much more diverse. Media culture, as part of post-socialism, shares and reflects the characteristics of Chinese society as a whole, which is full of "self-innovation and ideological hybridization" (Yu 2009, 7).

However, because of "commercialization without independence," many representations still adhere to social norms, despite this superficial diversity. TV stations strategically balance the needs of attracting audiences and dodging controversies. One of the most compelling examples is the representation of different masculinities. Representations of female masculinity, feminized masculinity, male cross-dressers, and hyper masculinity help to create a dazzling landscape on Chinese TV. "Indeed, the diversity of the contemporary sexed body [in popular Chinese media] questions many dominant assumptions about naturalized gender difference. However, this questioning is more implicit than explicit" (Evans 2008, 374). Because so far there have only been implicit representations, the dazzling landscape has not yet led to a revolutionary or liberal view on marginalized masculinities in contemporary Chinese mainstream media. As Harriet Evans (2008) argues, "Sex and its representations can work both to reaffirm and subvert the legitimacy of normative gender practices and expectations" (363). In China's case, the representation of alternative masculinities has been one of reaffirmation.

THE SCHOLARLY EXAMINATION OF MASCULINITY IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY CHINA

According to many scholarly studies, masculinity in China has been highly influenced, if not primarily determined, by men's political position in society. Kam Louie (2002) classified Chinese masculinity in the traditional culture into a dyad—*wen* (literary) masculinity and *wu* (martial) masculinity. In general, traditional Chinese masculinity is defined according to the capabilities or talents that people can gain from training and education, or as Geng Song (2010) argued, it is power-based rather than sex-based (405). Because of the influences of western culture and local economic and political situations, the representation of Chinese masculinity varies in different cultural contexts, such as in Hong Kong media. In

mainland China, masculinity has been influenced by the drastic political changes of the early socialist system. Lu Tonglin (1993) and Zhong Xueping (2000) have argued, based on their study of 1980s Chinese literature, that political suppression symbolically castrated Chinese male intellectuals. In the process of regaining what they had lost, Chinese intellectuals (mainly writers) started to connect masculinity with sexual desires and femininity, expressing their anxiety about impotence and manliness. This was probably the first time that intellectuals in socialist China boldly emphasized masculinity and sexual desires and the dependence of masculinity on femininity as a contrast and support. The most representative example of this type of literature is Zhang Xianliang's "Half of Man is Woman" (Zhong 2000; Song 2010).

Since the 1990s, scholars have paid increasing attention to masculinity in the mass media, especially in TV dramas. The study of TV dramas is also based on the tradition of literature studies. Sheldon Lu (2000), in his examination of the representation of masculinity in some popular 1990s Chinese TV dramas, argued that in a story about an international marriage, Chinese masculinity was represented by and celebrated through the depiction of the love of American and Russian women, the former representing the current superpower and the latter the former communist "big brother." These TV shows not only continued the sexualized portrayal of masculinity in literature from the 1980s but also connected masculinity with exotic femininity, and with a high consciousness of nationalism. The relationship between masculinity and femininity was firmly established, while the relationship between masculinity and nationalism was reinforced: a Chinese man who can win the heart of a foreign woman, these shows imply, is especially manly.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the representation of masculinity on TV has become more diverse. Agreeing with Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar's (2006) view on Chinese cinema, that the three male codes of "filiality, brotherhood, and loyalty" "have mythic status within modern and contemporary Chinese cultures," Geng Song (2010) pointed out that these codes are also conspicuous in recent TV productions. At the same time, the images of men in TV dramas "are a product of social changes that have challenged socialist norms and are tied in with new formations of power" (426). These new formations constantly cooperate, negotiate, and conflict with each other and with the "older" formations of power, such as the "newer" representations of masculinity and the commercialization rationale of the media industry, traditional gender norms, and the masculinity defined in the discourse created by hegemony and ideology, which both emphasize the spirit of nationalism. Meanwhile, men's lifestyle magazines, born in "the commercialization of culture in contemporary China" during the past 10 years, "attempt to equate the consumption of luxury items and women with the embodiment of cultural capital" (Song). "In so doing, they promote forms of masculinity that are distinguishable from both the Confucian and Maoist masculinities of earlier eras and the 'new man' (sensitive, narcissistic and highly invested in his physical appearance) and 'new lad' (hedonistic, concerned with beer, football and 'shagging' women) masculinity of the West" (Song & Lee 2010, 177).

FEMALE MASCULINITY AND FEMINIZED MASCULINITY: LI YUCHUN AND HAPPY BOYS

Both the *Super Female Voice* and the *Happy Male Voice* singing competitions are hosted by Hunan Satellite TV (HSTV). Prior to these shows, in 2003, HSTV premiered a singing competition called *Prince of Love Songs*, but the show received almost no audience attention. In 2004, having learned from the experience, HSTV hosted the *Super Female Voice* singing competition, which gained great success. But it was the 2005 *Super Female Voice*

season that made the show a national phenomenon and produced or incited a hot discussion. Fans followed their idols and traveled to different cities to show their support. More than 200 million audience members watched the show (Cai & Xie 2006), which created a new Chinese star: Li Yuchun. This tall and lean tomboyish girl, with a voice lower than that of most Chinese women, has become a hero to many. A small town in Chongqing even used her image on a nonprofit public advertisement to promote the one-child policy. “There is no difference between having a boy and having a girl,” the advertisement said (“Li Yuchun” 2009). With a biologically female body that is too slim to show many female characteristics, a low voice, boyish movements, and a boyish appearance, Li Yuchun ushered in a new era in Chinese media. What Li Yuchun represented was an example of tomboyism, which “generally describes an extended childhood period of female masculinity” (Halberstam 1998, 5). Female masculinity, as defined by Halberstam (1998), means masculinity that is displayed by women but is not simply an imitation of dominant masculinity. This female masculinity is also different from masculinized femininity because the former does not intentionally include any sexualized feminine characteristics, such as those exhibited in many mainstream TV dramas by tough and muscular female police officers dressed in clothes showing their curved bodies and cleavage. After becoming famous in the competition, Li Yuchun always dressed in boyish clothes and did not try to attract audiences with any kind of feminine characteristics recognized by the dominant culture.

With her impressive female masculinity, Li Yuchun has become a voice declaring that girls and young women (she was already twenty-one when she came on the scene) can be strong, competitive, and independent. The message is exciting and encouraging; however, the female masculinity Li Yuchun represents is not the same as the female masculinity celebrated by American scholars such as Judith Halberstam (1998), which could truly be a revolutionary force in gender identity politics.

Judith Halberstam (1998) argues that female masculinity is not merely a perverse supplement to dominant configurations of gender, and that masculinity itself cannot be fully understood unless female masculinity is taken into account. According to Halberstam, the labels given to masculine women, such as androgyne, tommy, female husband, lesbian, butch, and drag king, challenge two of the most common perceptions about masculinity: 1) masculinity is authentic; and 2) masculinity is bound to maleness. While Li Yuchun displays female masculinity and to a certain extent questions the relationship between masculinity and maleness, her representation in Chinese media does not really challenge the two perceptions that Halberstam points out. Li Yuchun represents a *mediated* female masculinity, which still emphasizes authenticity and the bond between masculinity and a body that is naturally less feminine and more boyish. At the same time, she has been asexualized in Chinese media, meaning her female masculinity is different from that performed by butch lesbians, a category that is one of the most important examples in Halberstam’s examination of female masculinity. The complex of media, hegemony, and individual success has provided a rich discourse, useful in understanding the negotiation of masculinity, femininity, and the powers that have shaped hegemony within the commercializing media context of modern China. This complex is revealed by the fact that reality TV was the forum in which Li Yuchun became famous and that the media built up the intertextuality of her performance and life in the process of shaping her fame.

Li Yuchun’s female masculinity is represented through three main interrelated texts: her appearance and behavior; her relationship with another competitor, He Jie, who has been her closest friend and classmate for years; and her parents. On TV, Li’s masculinity is a performance that does not challenge the stereotypical female body, given that she is thinner

and taller than most Chinese women and, as hinted by her childhood pictures shown on media, has always been this way. This naturalness makes her female masculinity acceptable and healthy, even as the unconventional gender norms that she displays thrill the audience. On the other hand, being thin and tall is also one of the scripts (to borrow the term used by Jane Ussher 1997) that media and society have written for femininity. Li's image simultaneously satisfies the female gaze on masculinity as well as the male gaze on femininity. As a female viewer in her 50s said in an interview: "I like *ta* (her/him). *Ta* (She/he) is like a girl because *ta* (she/he) is elegant, and like a man because *ta* (she/he) is handsome."² Li Yuchun's female masculinity is more than an image; her attitudes and mannerisms display feminine masculinity as well. She does not talk much, never displays overwhelming excitement as the other (girl) competitors do, always talks in a calm and low voice when answering questions from the show's host and fans, and sits with a relaxed posture during interviews with media.

Meanwhile, her friendship with He Jie, a short, cute, and pleasant girl, has contributed to Li Yuchun's female masculinity. During a TV appearance, Li Yuchun told the audience that it was He Jie who suggested that they go on the show together. During the long competition, they danced with each other, looking like a heterosexual couple because of the contrast between Li Yuchun's manly clothing and body and He Jie's extremely feminine dress and image, as well as the hugs they exchanged and the sweetness they showed towards each other whenever they won and when He Jie was voted out of the final. Their friendship was touching, and although ambiguous in its visual representation, romantic. The media representation of the relationship created a contrast between the masculinity of Li Yuchun and the femininity of He Jie, thereby protecting the dyad of the gender roles and "invariably reproduc(ing) the familiar terms of the gender binary" (Evans 2008 374).

The media also interviewed Li Yuchun's parents, who expressed their support for and pride in their daughter. Li Yuchun's mother was frequently in the audience during the competition. Thus, the media, while showing excitement at the newness and difference that Li Yuchun represented, made sure the audience knew that she grew up in a normal and loving family and, therefore, is "natural." Because she has her family's support, Li Yuchun's difference from the other female contestants does not "make specific reference to the broader implications of social power and hierarchy that the critical language of gender facilitates" (Evans 2008, 374).

While Li Yuchun was making a stir in the media and among young people, a group of well-dressed and polished boys appeared on Hunan Satellite TV's *Happy Male Voice* competition. After *Super Female Voice*'s success, HSTV gained fame for having good (currently the best) entertainment programs. The excitement and "revolutionary" message that *Super Female Voice* brought to audiences earned for HSTV a huge group of loyal fans. Unlike 2003's *Prince of Love Songs*, the 2007 and 2010 competitions on *Happy Male Voice*, a men-only show, were very successful. Although the theme of the show was "happy" voices, most of the competitors who made it onto the top-12 sang melancholy love songs. The well-coiffed hair and skinny pants of many of the singers in the 2010 competition echoed the images of feminized young men already popular in East Asian media. Androgynous male celebrities, from boyish ones appealing to high-school girls to adult young men who wear long hair and makeup, have been popular in Japan for a long time (Darling-Wolf 2004, 287). These "new men" (Darling-Wolf 2004, 287) have affected the cultures of other East Asian countries, such as Korea, Taiwan, and China, and Korean popular culture reinforces the image of androgynous young men in the region. The evolution of the new men in East Asian popular culture can be explained by Koichi Iwabuchi's (2002) concept of "cultural proximity"—cultures with similarities tend to more easily influence and affect each other.

Therefore, it was not a surprise when feminized young men appeared in Chinese media, but it did provide the opportunity to expose feminized masculinity as a cultural phenomenon in contemporary China.

Initially, the 2010 *Happy Male Voice* competition embraced participants' diversity. However, the competition gained international attention when one contestant, Liu Zhu, was banned from the show. Liu Zhu started wearing girls' clothes when he was in high school. His voice and appearance was almost the same as that of most girls, which surprised the show's judges. Because Liu Zhu was represented as a different type of man/boy in the show, he became a controversial figure (Tian 2010). He gained many fans during the competition; however, the media represented him ambiguously. When he was interviewed along with another participant, Shi Yang (who could barely sing but was not afraid to do bizarre things to get attention), the media categorized them as the same type, and Liu Zhu and Shi Yang themselves seemed happy to be paired up. The media also interviewed Liu Zhu's mother, who said that she was happy her son was doing what he liked and that she wanted him to enjoy the competition. As with Li Yuchun, Liu Zhu's unconventional appearance and voice were established as "normal" by the disclosure of his mother's support and understanding. However, Liu Zhu was eventually voted off the show because the oddness of his feminine voice and image in a show of boys' voices.

In addition to being the forum for Liu Zhu's dramatic debut and exit, the 2010 *Happy Male Voice* competition also showed an interesting pattern: the contestants who displayed more conventional gender norms, such as being physically stronger and more mature, and who seemed to have more performing experience, were gradually voted out of the competition, while the sensitive, cute, younger participants were allowed to stay and became more masculine towards the end of the season. In the music video promoting the final 12 competitors, the participants were shown singing hip-hop, playing basketball, and exercising in a gym; even the contestant who was regarded as extremely elegant because of his sensitivity was shown sweating in his sports gear. In the end, Li Wei, who matched the mainstream culture's expectation of a healthy young man with a pleasant, generic male singing voice, emerged as champion. All the differences that had stirred up discussion, attracted media attention, and challenged gender norms were either eliminated or resolved by the end of the season.

Chinese sociologist Li Yinhe said the "2005 *Super Female's Voice* singing competition is a success of transgenderism" (Zhang 2005). However, considering the strategies used by the media in the process, this was more a success of the media industry than of marginalized gender norms. As a case in point, media producers declared that they "built" the competitors' images, understandably for the benefit of the industry. The competition and the emphasis on the uniqueness and naturalness of the atypical gender roles illustrate that, as Evans (2008) has argued, "the diverse forms which the sexualized body takes in contemporary China discursively function as emblems of the individualist ideology of market opportunity and competition" (378). The *Super Female Voice* and *Happy Male Voice* contestants who challenge dominant gender norms are represented as courageous individuals who dare to chase their dreams. This emphasis on individuals is apparent not only in the reality TV shows but also in the competitors' media images in their careers since then. Li Yuchun is not the only one that appeared in the show in a tomboyish look, but she is the only star who has sustained her gender-neutral image and remained independent and successful after being on the show. The other girls, who were constructed with a more masculine image, have had to switch to a sexy and feminine image to remain popular. Liu Zhu, despite having recorded some music videos and songs immediately after his exposure on the show, is fad-

ing from the media spotlight. To capture audiences' attention, some of the young men have cross-dressed and presented themselves with beautiful female appearances, but also always with a clear message: "I like girls, and I will marry a girl in the future." The point here is that the media use different rhetoric to represent female androgyny and male transvestites. The former is celebrated because female androgyny continues socialist China's promotion of masculinized femininity; the latter is modified with a clear declaration of the men's sexuality to clarify the ambiguity of the performance that questions the dyad relationship between masculinity and heterosexuality.

The linkage between masculinity and sexuality has been prevalent in literature and media since the 1980s. The media's indifference to Li Yuchun's personal life after she became a well-known celebrity suggests that an asexualized, androgynous female who performs masculinity, although challenging to a certain degree to binary gender norms, ultimately conforms to the mainstream culture's values for women, and can be held up as a role model to young girls in that she is chaste and independent. Indeed, the media co-opted and contained Li Yuchun's unconventional identity because it was more concerned about audience attention than the meanings that the performers' behaviors could carry, thus precluding the possibility of bringing real, diversified masculinity into society.

DIRTY COMEDIAN AND MASCULINITY RIDICULED

Xiao Shenyang, a comedian who, like most of the singers in HSTV's singing competitions, was born in post-1980s China, suddenly became famous after he appeared on CCTV's *New Year's Eve Gala*.³ Xiao Shenyang often performs wearing women's clothes and speaks in a high voice, but he keeps his hair short. While Chinese comedians often imitate women to be funny, and Xiao Shenyang's original career as a performer of *Er Ren Zhuan* often required him to mimic a woman, his quick rise to fame and repeated appearances in ridiculous clothes soon made him a controversial figure. Thus, like Liu Zhu, Xiao Shenyang also gained international recognition. The U.S. magazine *Newsweek* published a long report calling Xiao Shenyang "the dirtiest man in China" (Liu & Fish 2010). Xiao Shenyang's television show is actually no dirtier than those of other popular comedians, although his live shows in bars and other venues often include sexual jokes. His success on Chinese television is due not to the dirty jokes but to his modest background. As a young man who did not have any formal education and grew up in a poor, single-parent family, Xiao Shenyang won over Chinese audiences with his "ordinariness" and "authentic talent," which are also celebrated in reality TV shows.

And yet, despite the individual-talent narrative, Xiao Shenyang's popularity is nonetheless a product of media commercialization. His main "talent" is to ridicule masculine images by wearing women's clothing and exaggerated makeup and singing, with skill matching that of professional performers, in the high voice with which he was born. Although his cross-dressing performance is satire, the media nevertheless must emphasize that he is a normal man. His experience shows, once again, how the media must balance the needs of its commercialized industry with the preservation of a "normal" and less confusing gender representation. The media's emphasis on Xiao Shenyang's role as a loving husband and father and his modest background "safeguard the stability of the family as a social and economic unit, the success of which derives from individual effort and competition" (Evans 2008, 378).

Uneasiness about feminized masculinity, mockery of cross-dressed comedians, and satirical comments about female masculinity are often expressed on the Internet and on TV. In fact, the very few media figures who have challenged gender norms have been normal-

ized by the media, including Xiao Shenyang. Although exposed, these alternative masculinities are always represented as individual choices and never tend to be critical of the gender norms in mainstream Chinese culture. As a result, “detached from a critical language of articulation with which to address hierarchical relations between men and women, sex and sexuality become components of individual exploration, dissociated from the broader issues of power and injustice” (Evans 2008, 378). Despite these eye-catching images of non-traditional masculinity, images of excessive masculinity have also been flooding Chinese media, especially television dramas, since the 1990s, when television production companies began to increase in number and freedom.

REAL MEN: MASCULINITY DEFINED BY NATIONALISM BUT CREATED BY THE MEDIA INDUSTRY

At the same time that many people complain that young Chinese men, especially popular media stars, have become less masculine, Chinese television dramas contain more macho, masculine images than ever before. Spies, martial artists, war heroes, experienced detectives, tough businessmen, flawed yet brave soldiers, gangsters, undercover police officers, smart politicians, generals, and emperors repeatedly appear on Chinese television and the Internet. The media spends much time and energy constructing and representing a masculinity that reaffirms the toughness, rationality, and patriotism of the conventional patriarchal masculinity. Li Yinhe, the first woman scholar to study sexuality in China, claimed that “Chinese TV has entered the era of real/true men” after many war stories had become big hits on Chinese TV and in Chinese films (“Dianshi Ju” 2009). Li Yinhe’s discussion implies that this phenomenon is new; however, the war stories are actually a continuation of the style of the *Xishuo* (playfully told) emperor dramas that have been shown on Chinese TV since the 1990s. Zhong Xueping (2010) argued that some of the *Xishuo* emperor dramas make the powerful men seem like the “many temporarily misguided father figures in typical Hollywood productions” (55). These dramas turn the emperor, a negative historical symbol, into a modern-day superhero as they portray good-hearted young people helping the old and moody emperors become more human (Zhong 2010, 54-57). These *Xishuo* emperor dramas started to appear on Chinese TV in the 1990s, especially after Hong Kong and Taiwan media producers began to explore the mainland market. Many independent media producers from the mainland, such as Zhang Guoli, followed in their footsteps and created playful stories about officials and emperors that became very popular.

In the 1990s, wanting to correct the misrepresentations in those stories, CCTV acted like the dominant media responding to the popular media, producing something different than the TV shows created by other independent companies and imported from Hong Kong and Taiwan. This pattern lasted for a while, until this playful and cool style was used to tell the stories of the war heroes and underground party members who had contributed to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. CCTV started to embrace these heroes in the 21st century. One of the great examples is *Liang Jian* (*Unsheathing the Sword* 2005). In this story, the hero, Li Yunlong, a (fictional) high-ranking general in the PLA during the anti-Japanese War and the Civil War, displays a masculinity that is “a far cry from that exemplified by Maoist heroes. Instead, it reflects a revival of the outlaw and tough guy (*haohan*) culture in premodern China” (Song 2010, 423). At the same time, Li Yunlong’s will to acquire weapons during the war shows “the ubiquitous mercantile spirit” of modern-day China (423). I agree with this argument and would add to it that Li Yunlong is like a child who treats weapons like toys and war like a game, a portrayal to bring out the image of a cool and playful hero. *Liang Jian* was the most popular TV drama in 2005 and was

welcomed by both CCTV and provincial TV stations.

Liang Jian covers Li Yunlong's transformation from an inarticulate but genius peasant general into a thinker who can both theorize and express his military strategy. His talent, boldness, and personal loyalty refer to *Wu* masculinity in traditional China of the past; his peasant family background, near illiteracy, and bad temper refer to the proletariat masculinity in the communist China of the 20th century; and his attitude toward competing with his comrades, winning battles, and capturing weapons for his army embody the mercantile-spirited masculinity in current China. The portrayal of Li Yunlong reflects a reconciliation between masculinity in China's past and masculinity in contemporary (21st century) China.

The success of *Liang Jian* reflects that, faced with pressure from independent and imported media, the authoritative media, such as CCTV and its affiliates, have had to find a hybrid role between their status as protectors of the dominant ideology and as competitors in the media industry. The success of *Liang Jian* inspired a new sphere of war stories and heroes in the post-socialist Chinese media. From this also evolved the genre of war and communist heroes, a genre in which mainland-China media producers have always dominated in the domestic media market. With the explosion of this evolved genre, many excessively masculine figures have been created in the last five or six years. TV stations have launched several dramas similar to *Liang Jian*, which have reinforced the dominant status of macho masculinity on the Chinese screen. The popularity of the actors cast in these hyper-masculine roles illustrates the influence of the dramas.⁴ Actors Li Youbin, Sun Honglei, Wang Zhiwen, Zhang Guoqiang, Zhang Hanyu and Wang Baoqiang, among others, have all been depicted as "real/true men" on the Chinese screen. Jiang Wen, who has always represented the macho and northern Chinese since his first appearance in the Chinese media in the 1980s, and who gained popularity through the TV drama *Beijing Ren zai Niuyue* (*Beijingers in New York City*) in the 1990s, reached the peak of success by directing the movie *Rang Zidan Fei* (*Let the Bullets Fly*, 2010).

Unlike most of the "ordinary" people on reality TV, who have been transient figures on Chinese television, the actors who depict macho masculinity can always find new roles in the prosperous TV drama industry. TV dramas make up the biggest category of the Chinese TV market. According to statistics, TV dramas produce 50 percent of the income for most TV stations ("Zhongguo Dianshiju Wushi Nian" 2009). Although it may seem as though different masculinities are often seen on the screen, their scarcity in TV dramas and the dominant position of TV dramas among other genres in the Chinese TV industry makes clear that the dominant Chinese media is working to protect conventional masculinity.

CONCLUSION

With super girls, happy and beautiful boys, dirty comedians, and real/true men, Chinese TV has to some degree diversified its representations of masculinity to create newness and to appeal to different audiences, with the goal of expanding market share in a newly competitive media industry. However, the economic concern of the media industry alone cannot bring real change to established cultural ideology, and this diversity is just an illusion. Due to the media's strategic combination of genre, content, and representation, the exposure of unconventional masculinity in Chinese television carries neither any revolutionary meaning nor encourages true openness to unconventional masculinities in Chinese mainstream culture.

The diversified masculinity on Chinese television only shows that, faced with far more complex and rapidly-changing norms than before, the media industry—including both independent and state sponsored stations—has had to constantly negotiate and compromise

between the economic imperative to create excitement and the need to protect conventional views on masculinity. Unconventional masculinity is exposed either through boys and girls whose identities are still flexible and not yet fully shaped or through comedians in the form of satire. The media also constantly reminds viewers of the normalcy of the performers' personalities by referring to traditional values, especially ones relating to family.

Meanwhile, the middle-aged "real/true" men who have experienced fame in the entertainment field are reestablishing conventional masculinity. Every one of the actors crowned as a real/true man has performed in at least one war- or army-themed show that has become a big hit. The characters they portray, despite having some shortcomings, are tough, determined, responsible, and talented. The TV dramas or films in which they often appear do not have any important female characters and thus are purely male dramas. Almost all the actors are in their 40s or 50s, and some of them, such as Jiang Wen and Hu Jun, have gained international fame. These actors' families are rarely presented in the media unless the wife is a foreigner (such as Jiang Wen's ex-wife, who is French) or a public figure (such as Chen Baoguo's wife, who is also an actress).

The current Chinese media is strategic about entertainment for economic value while, at the same time, protecting conventional gender norms. Without a strong voice from the academic and political fields to challenge the dominant values on gender and sexuality, the conservative and highly censored Chinese media will not truly provoke a real change in the culture.

NOTES

1. Chinese Central Television Station was created on May 1, 1958. It originally was named "Beijing TV" and adopted its current name on May 1, 1978. Its English abbreviation is "CCTV." Currently, CCTV owns 45 channels. CCTV is the most important official media in China and is responsible for promoting values that confirm the Chinese government's ideology.
2. In Chinese language, "he" and "she" share the same pronunciation, "ta." As a result, when the interviewer said "ta," the pronoun could mean both.
3. Although Xiao Shenyang has been criticized by many in the older generation of artists, who mainly perform on CCTV, his instantaneous fame and success paradoxically confirm CCTV's role in the Chinese media to serve the majority population, including different age groups and social classes. His fame was ushered in by the Chinese *New Year's Eve Gala*, a show that, since its debut in 1983, has always achieved the largest audience share during its time slot. This "traditional" show has been the "king" of all programs in the nation. Xiao Shenyang's quick rise to fame reflects CCTV's power and is a response to competitive threats from HSTV and STV, which are located in southern China and are more ratings oriented. Xiao Shenyang's career illustrates that CCTV, like its competitors, can be entertaining, and that it has become a platform for ordinary people to live out their dreams of fame and success. More important, the success achieved via CCTV is even faster and bigger because an ordinary person like Xiao Shenyang need not go through a tedious competition such as those on HSTV, and can become famous literally in one night. Including Xiao Shenyang in CCTV's 2009 *New Year's Eve Gala* was CCTV's response to HSTV's and other provincial satellite stations' challenge—creating opportunities for ordinary people, bringing newness, and providing pure-entertainment performances.
4. Since *Liang Jian*, many dramas about soldiers and the army have gained popularity. These include *Wo Shi Tezhong Bing* (*We are Special Troops*, 2011); *Qian Fu* (*The Undercover Man*, 2008); *Wo de Tuanzhang, Wo de Tuan* (*My Regiment Commander, My Regiment*, 2009); *DA Shi* (*DA Division*, 2006); *Zhongguo Xiongdian Lian* (*Chinese Brother Band*, 2008); *Wo de Xiongdian Jiao Shunliu* (*My Brother's Name is Smooth*, 2009); and *Renjian Zhengdao Shi Cangsang* (*Man's World is Mutable, Seas become Mulberry Fields*, 2009).

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