THE VOICE OF A NEW CHINA:
DEMOCRATIC BEHAVIORS IN CHINESE REALITY SHOWS
SUPER GIRL AND *HAPPY GIRLS*

by

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Wan-chun Huang, M.A.

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China's media have long served the Communist Party's political purposes, and China's television has always been under government censorship. One of China's first reality shows, *Super Girl*, showed too much of the "democratic" idea according to the Communist Party, which then banned it in 2006. Nevertheless, the show, in effect, introduced the participatory audience, and Chinese audiences became consumers who not only actively sought new information but also actively participated in a given show. Now, because of today's new media technologies and their convergence, the relationship between producers and consumers has been both reshaped and consolidated, empowering the rights of the participatory audience and spurring democratic ideas in Chinese society. The Chinese consumers nowadays are thus able to participate in both creating the media text and at the same time collectively making their own meaning in that text. Because of such an empowered audience, China's reality shows have become a powerful platform and conduit that allow the voice of the Chinese people to be heard. Therefore, in this paper, I will examine four aspects of the Chinese reality shows in an era of "media convergence": first, the new relationship between China's government and media producers; second, the intense cooperation between Chinese new media producers and consumers; third, the public voice created by new Chinese audiences on new media platforms on the Internet; and fourth, the limitations and possibilities of democratic participation in Chinese reality shows.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

"Cast your sacred vote, please! Your vote represents your concern, support, and trust in the person you vote for. The candidate's winning depends on your vote. So, dear voters, do not hesitate, get up and vote for the one you support!"[1] In democratic countries, we often hear this kind of urging during a campaign season. Yet, the above quoted lines come from a reality TV show in China—2011's *Happy Girls*—that introduced intense debate and impassioned voting to Chinese audiences. In this thesis, I examine how the Chinese media company Hunan TV employed multiple new media technologies and platforms to introduce the Chinese audiences to a world of "media convergence."[2] It revived the voting sessions that had been banned by the Chinese government that had been used in the previous reality show *Super Girl*. Through "media convergence," the extent of Chinese audiences' participation in the shows did not decrease, but rather, became more and more intense.

In this study, I examine the two singing competition/reality shows—*Super Girl* and *Happy Girls*. Through the case of *Happy Girls*, I investigate the transition of *Happy Girls* from its predecessor *Super Girl*, which illustrates the transition of China's old media to new ones. Specifically, I investigate the online responses and interactions among China's Internet users related to these reality shows. That is, I explore the "public space" created by the online viewers

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[1] "Top 10 Perform," *Happy Girls,* Hunan TV, season 2, episode 2, directed by Hao Ma, aired July 22, 2011, television.

[2] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 10.

and their "public voice." Moreover, I analyze the voting behavior in both shows. In analyzing the mobilized voters and the canvassed voting online, I intend to convey how the Chinese people learned the democratic behaviors of voting, debating, and campaigning online.

Moreover, I show how these democratic behaviors did not merely stay in the online space. Hunan TV, recognizing the readiness and willingness of Chinese audiences, brought the online campaign to the stage. Because of "media convergence," the relationship between media producers and consumers is changed. By making the online voting campaign a part of the show itself, Hunan TV's reality show *Happy Girls* manifested the online campaign upon the stage, fulfilling Chinese audiences' desire to participate in a democratic campaign. In discussing the campaign-like rhetoric, I examine how democratic behaviors were revived on Chinese reality shows and how the Chinese people practiced such behaviors both in the shows' broadcasting times and within their daily lives.

Finally, I investigate the Chinese government's reaction to such democratic behaviors emerging in China, looking into both the government's compromise with and its suppression of a new media culture in contemporary China. In the world of "media convergence" surrounding *Super Girl* and *Happy Girls*, media content did not stay in one place; instead, both the Chinese media producers and consumers circulated, generated, and regenerated media content. Because of Hunan TV's reality shows, the Chinese audiences were introduced to a democratic participation where they had the freedom to access information, create their public space, practice free speech, and cast their votes. The voices of Chinese audiences, rather than being silenced by the government's ban, became more and more essential to the shows' content.

1.1   CHINA'S MEDIA BETWEEN CONSTRAINTS AND PROFITS

China's economic reforms since 1979 have paved a broader world for China's media; yet, China's media has a long history of being controlled by the government, which continues today. In this section, I show how China's media has taken advantage of the economic reforms to produce its own media content. After the reforms, China's media has a chance to create content that could attract both audience's attention and commercial profits as long as it does not violate the government's objectives.

Before the economic reforms, the government—either the state or provinces—controlled China's television. Ruoyun Bai and Geng Song point out in their book *Chinese Television in the Twenty-First Century*, "The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regarded television as its mouthpiece and ideological instrument."[3] Rather than entertainment, the purpose of Chinese television, following the use of media in the Cultural Revolution, has been "education," using propaganda to give the Chinese people a national agenda.[4] Not until the economic reforms in 1979 were commercials introduced to salvage the failing economy following the Cultural Revolution.[5]

Later on in 1992, the privatization and industrialization focus of Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese statesman during 1978 to 1992, brought China to the next stage of a market economy. Bai and Song state, "all provincial television stations launched satellite channels to seek a national audience for their ad clients, television drama skyrocketed in economic importance to television stations and became essentially an advertiser's medium."[6] Resonating with their financial freedom

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[3] Ruoyun Bai and Geng Song, eds., *Chinese Television in the Twenty-First Century: Entertaining the Nation* (London: Routledge, 2015), 2.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 3.

and market-oriented strategy, China's TV stations had a boom in production of their dramas and shows. Ying Zhu also points out in a 1997 study of the provincial and municipal TV stations, "[The] amount of money contributed by these stations to their corresponding governments was ten times the financial subsidy received from the government."[7] Less than one decade from the reforms in 1979, China's media network not only became self-reliant but also was able to quickly generate profit to both contribute to the local government and support its broadcasting.

In response to the rapid change of China's media, the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television (MRFT) in 1995 released its first report—including the objective to improve the quantity and quality of radio and television programs. According to Ying Zhu, a Chinese media scholar, "quantity" implies that "'under correct ideological guidance,' cultural products should be 'richer,' more 'colorful,' and 'creative'[8] in order to attract viewers,"[9] which shows a pursuit of profit while seeking diversity of media content. She adds that "quality" refers to a media content that follows the government's ideology. Ying Zhu writes:[10]

> The MRFT defined "quality" as content that would "promote the main melody and advocate diversity." The "main melody," according to President Jiang Zemin, was "patriotism, socialism and collectivism," a song to "reflect the spirits of the era and nation, unite people's hearts, encourage progress and propel social development and advancement."

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[7] Ying Zhu, *Two Billion Eyes: The Story of China Central Television* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 22.

[8] Li Tieying, "Speech Given in the Meeting with the CCTV's Staffs" (1995), in General Office of SARFT, ed., *The Important Documents of Broadcasting and Film Work 1995, Beijing: The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television* (in Chinese) (Beijing: SARFT, 2000), 255, quoted in Zhu, *Two Billion Eyes*, 25.

[9] Zhu, *Two Billion Eyes*, 25.

[10] Zhu, *Two Billion Eyes*, 24-25.

The above statement suggests the government's ongoing constraint of China's media and foreshadows the future path of the media—the intersection of state ideology and market logic. China's media have benefited from economic reforms as long as they respect the nation's "ideological guidance." After the economic reforms, China's television earned a space between the party and the market, executing "a mix of Party logic and market logic."[11]

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[11] Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 2.

2.0   2005'S *SUPER GIRL*—CREATION OF THE PARTICIPATORY AUDIENCE

2005's *Super Girl* highlighted that China's media have gained the power to generate profit-oriented content that targets audience attention and participation. Although the show was banned by the government, it introduced the "participatory audience" to China's media industry. From then on, Hunan TV could not ignore the audience's participation when generating their media content.

Following the mixed logic of party and market after China's economic reforms, Hunan TV,[12] a province-run station, introduced the Chinese audience to the media content of a reality show, a content that requires audience's participation and involvement. China's *Super Girl,* first broadcast in 2004 on Hunan TV, represents a Chinese version of the West's reality show *American Idol*.[13] This imitation of a Western reality show quickly gained more ratings than the Chinese reality programs that had broadcast before it, attracting an accumulative 140 million viewers.[14] *Super Girl* was popular for two reasons: it featured China's most talented singer; and it was the first time Chinese audiences were invited to interact with both the players on and the producers of the TV show itself.

For example, in the final show of *Super Girl* in 2005, Hunan TV, using *American Idol* as its model, offered a period of voting, welcoming the Chinese audience to decide who would be China's next top woman singer. In "Reality Television and Voting Behavior: A New Way For

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[12] Hunan TV launched in 1997, and it is currently China's second-most-watched channel, second only to CCTV-1, China's official channel.

[13] Bai and Song, eds., *Chinese Television in the Twenty-First Century*, 5.

[14] Zhifeng Hu, "*Super Girl*: a successful localized reality show," *People Daily*, October 13, 2006, http://media.people.com.cn/BIG5/22114/50421/72372/4916658.html.

Viewer's Interaction," Kiley Katherine Tomassi points out "interactivity" as an essential element that differentiates reality shows from other television programs: "The interactive nature of *American Idol* enables viewers to engage in a parasocial connection much more easily than a standard television show."[15] When the audience members consumed, discussed, and voted, they imagined themselves developing "parasocial relationships"[16] with the performers, relationships that "feel like close interpersonal friendships"[17] and that "involve feelings and reactions toward characters."[18] As a result, reality shows have become the most popular media content to engage audience's various voices in today's television programs.

Compared to *American Idol,* where the viewing audience casts as many votes as it wants in a two-hour voting window each week, each member of the Chinese viewing audience had only a total of fifteen votes for *Super Girl'*s finale. Nevertheless, such a call for audience participation was a breakthrough for Chinese television. Because the network assigned the audience a determined role in deciding the next top Chinese singer, it drew around 400 million viewers and eight million text message votes for a single show in a single night.[19] The winner of the competition, Li Yuchun, garnered 3.5 million text message votes,[20] thus winning the first on-air singing competition—the first campaign of the Chinese people.

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[15] Kiley K. Tomassi, "Reality Television and Voting Behavior: A New Way For Viewer's Interaction" (M.A. Thesis, University of Wyoming, 2011), 59, ProQuest (UMI 1510230).

[16] Donald Horton and Richard Wohl, "Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance," *Psychiatry* 19, (1956): 215-229.

[17] Edward Schiappa, Mike Allen, and Peter B. Gregg, "Parasocial Relationships and Television: A Meta-Analysis of the Effects," in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances Through Meta-Analysis,* ed. Raymond W. Preiss, Barbara Mae Gayle, Nancy Burrell, Mike Allen, and Jennings Bryant (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 301-315, quoted in Tomassi, "Reality Television and Voting Behavior," 11.

[18] Jonathan Cohen, "Parasocial Breakups: Measuring Individual Differences in Responses to the Dissolution of Parasocial Relationships," *Mass Communication and Society* 6, no. 2 (2003): 191, quoted in Tomassi, "Reality Television and Voting Behavior," 13.

[19] Jim Yardley, "An unlikely pop icon worries China," *International Herald Tribune*, September 5, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/04/world/asia/04iht-super.html.

[20] Li Cui and Francis L. F. Lee, "Becoming Extra-Ordinary: Negotiation of Media Power in the Case of *Super Girls' Voice* in China," *Popular Communication* 8, (2010): 256.

2.1   VOTE FOR LI, VOTE FOR A "CHINESE DREAM"

Not only did Li's singing performance overwhelm the audiences but also the audience's engagement accomplished her success. In this section, I demonstrate that the performances in Hunan TV's singing competition elicited emotions about the performers among the audience members. In addition, the voting sessions in reality shows provided the right platform for Chinese audiences to put their affections into action. Li's success represented a new "Chinese dream" of the Chinese people who wanted their voices to be heard.

Li won the campaign because of her androgynous characteristics that challenged traditional norms of being a Chinese woman. According to *Time* Magazine, Li's success is "far beyond her voice . . . [She possessed] attitude, originality and a proud androgyny that defied Chinese norms."[21] Rather than being someone who simply perpetuated the "norms," Li instead deviated from the Chinese tradition and attracted the Chinese audience. In her audition song, "In My Heart There's Only You, Never Her"—a song rarely sung by a female—Li's interpretation of the song embodied a boy's affection for a beloved girl so well that she won a ticket to the final contest.[22] When a Chinese audience sees and hears Li perform on stage, the audience, no doubt, perceives Li as a "tomboy," a persona they never experienced from a female singer before. In her book *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion*, Kristyn Gorton explains such an emotional reaction to music as follows: "Music is often used to accompany a particularly poignant moment in television and can elicit emotion from the viewer."[23] *Super Girl*'s singing competition seems to be

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[21] Susan Jakes, "Li Yuchun," *TIME*, October 3, 2005, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2054304,00.html.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Kristyn Gorton, *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 82.

the most suitable conduit to arouse emotion and compassion for Li's androgynous characteristics, while also being an ideal platform for establishing a new notion of Chinese women.

Figure 1. Li Yuchun on the cover of *Time* Magazine

"2005 Asia's Heroes," *Time* Magazine. October 10, 2005, Special Issue, cover. Available from: Xinhua website, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/2010-05/20/c_13306261.htm (accessed March 1, 2016).

More than demonstrating an androgynous characteristic, Li provides the audience with a "Chinese dream"—a dream in which an ordinary person can become a star. Unlike most performers who have already established their celebrity status, the performers in *Super Girl* are all ordinary people selected from China's provinces. For example, Li, the winner of the competition, was an undergraduate student of the Sichuan Conservatory of Music. The audience initially saw her as a typical girl they might encounter in daily life. Rather than being distant stars, the show's

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performers evoke a sense of familiarity; they provide the audience with their "capacity to appeal,"[24] accounting for the intimacy between both the performers and the audience.

Li's success, in effect, reflects the audience's desire and passion to pursue individual dreams. Ling Yang, a Chinese media scholar, recognizes, "Compared to the top-down emotion work implemented by the party-state, *Super Girl* carves out a new affective sphere where fans can invest their emotional capital into an informal, autonomous, grassroots community for the collective goal of supporting their idol."[25] While the Chinese audience consumes the show, the affective sphere is imagined and generated by bottom-up forces, not a top-down process. In this way, the show not only becomes a space where the audience members can feel passion for the life of the performer, but also a place that creates meaning for their own lives and dreams.

2.2   THE BAN OF *SUPER GIRL*

China's government was so astonished by the readiness of the Chinese audience to select their version of a female role model by democratic voting that it banned *Super Girl* in 2006. While Li offered a dream for Chinese individuals, the Chinese government did not fully accept the people's definition, since the government had its own version of a "Chinese dream." Although the Chinese government adopted the West's capitalism after the economic reforms, it did not give up its long-held control over the public sphere. Considering China's current President Xi Jinping's speech,

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[24] Akiko Takeyama, "Intimacy for Sale: Masculinity, Entrepreneurship, and Commodity Self in Japan's Neoliberal Situation," *Japanese* Studies 30, no. 2 (2010): 237, quoted in Lorraine Plourde, "Cat Cafés Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan,*" Japanese Studies* 34, no. 2 (2014): 128.

[25] Ling Yang, "Reality Talent Shows in China: Transnational Format, Affective Engagement, and the Chinese Dream," in *A Companion to Reality Television*, ed. Laurie Ouellette (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 528.

Guobin Yang suggests in his article "The Return of Ideology and the Future of Chinese Internet Policy," "[While] every Chinese has his or her own ideals and dreams, the greatest dream of all Chinese in modern history is the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."[26] Yang not only points out the government's continued reluctance to give up its control over the public realm, but he also foreshadows the government's suppression of the show because of the show's advocacy of individualism.

Also, the democratic spirit integral to the show aroused public interest, drawing the attention of the government. For example, *Beijing Today,* the state-run English version newspaper*,* questioned the stability of China by featuring the following headline on its front page: "Is *Super Girl* a Force for Democracy?"[27] On *Super Girl*, much like the astonishing Tiananmen protest in 1989, the members of that great "assembly" of Chinese people provided their own "public voice." Such a public display so overwhelmed China's government that government officials quickly banned *Super Girl* in 2006 due to its democratic nature.[28] Furthermore, in 2007, China's State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), in direct response to *Super Girl*, announced the banning of "Public Participation in Television Programming," which, in effect, outlawed the voting rights of the viewers outside the studio.[29]

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[26] Guobin Yang, "The Return of Ideology and the Future of Chinese Internet Policy," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31, no. 2 (2014): 110.

[27] "Democracy Idol: A television show challenges the authorities," *The Economist*, September 8, 2005, accessed July 10, 2015, http://www.economist.com/node/4382469.

[28] Andrew Jacobs, "Popularity May Have Doomed Chinese TV Talent Show" *The New York Times*, last modified September 19, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/20/world/asia/popularity-may-have-doomed-chinese-tv-talent-show.html.

[29] "Public Participation in Television Programming," Hubei Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, last modified April 18, 2007, http://www.hbnp.gov.cn/gk/flfg/gfxwj/17310.htm.

3.0   2009'S *HAPPY GIRLS*—CYBERSPACE FOR NEW CONSUMERS

Although 2005's *Super Girl* has been banned by the government, Hunan TV did not give up on the new media content of reality shows and this new way of generating profits. Rather than catering to what the government wanted, Hunan TV continued to produce a similar show and broadcast it on a fresh conduit—the Internet. In 2009, *Super Girl* changed its Chinese title to *Happy Girls* (the English title remained as *Super Girl*). In association with multiple new media platforms, such as Tencent and PPTV,[30] the show broadcast on cable as well as on the Internet, a worldwide platform without geographical boundaries. Although the government banned the show from broadcasting on TV networks, the show now broadcast in a world larger than the previous one. This marks a new age of China's media where the media content is not under the government's direct control because media benefits from the efficient distribution on the Internet that can sometimes evade the government's radar.

Because Hunan TV's cooperation with new media platforms exceeded the limit of China's traditional cable TV, the Chinese audience, instead of having to watch television programs at regular times from their homes, now had the freedom to access shows whenever they chose from cable and their computers. Ithiel de Sola Pool describes such a "freedom" in media as follows: "Freedom is fostered when the means of communication are dispersed, decentralized, and easily available."[31] The computer and the Internet introduced Chinese viewers to the wider broadcast

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[30] PPTV, launched in 2005, is an entertainment media-streaming website where people can watch uploaded videos for free, and Tencent, launched in 2004, is a website that provides Internet, media, and entertainment services.

[31] Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies of Freedom: On Free Speech in an Electronic Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 5.

world where they could actively search for specific media content and learn more information that the government did not permit them to know. As Lawrence Lessig summarizes in his article "The Law of Cyberspace," "Cyberspace is unavoidable, and yet cyberspace is unregulatable. No nation can live without it, yet no nation can control behavior within it. Cyberspace is that space where individuals are, inherently, free from control by real space sovereigns." [32] No individual or government could claim the exact ownership of the Internet due to its decentralized quality. Therefore, although the government banned the airing of *Super Girl* on television, Hunan TV overcame this barrier by continuing to circulate the media content on China's Internet. The Chinese audiences were able to overcome the ban and receive information from the Internet. Yongnian Zheng writes in his book *Technological Empowerment: the Internet, State, and Society in China*, "Information technology enables marginalized groups to overcome resource limitations." [33] Chinese audiences marginalized to watch the show found a new venue—the Internet—to consume it. The popularity of *Happy Girls* in 2009 validates the Internet's empowerment. The freedom the Internet provided helped PPTV to reach 1.75 billion users[34]—an accumulation of online viewers who PPTV called "the netizens"—a coined word borrowed from the Internet pioneer Michael F. Hauben.[35] Those netizens, who used the Internet to know more about the larger world around them, moved freely on and off multiple media platforms.

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[32] Lawrence Lessig, "Laws of Cyberspace" (1998), available from http://www.lessig.org, quoted in Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn ed., *Democracy and New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 5.

[33] Ibid., 87.

[34] "History of PPTV," PPTV official website, accessed July 10, 2015, http://www.pptv.com/aboutus/.

[35] Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* (Los Alamitos: Wiley-IEEE Computer Society Press, 1997).

3.1   CALL FOR NETIZENS' VOTES

Unlike traditional broadcasting, the Internet enlarged the audience's viewing experience to a "participatory" experience. In this section, I examine how Chinese audience members regain their rights of voting in the show through the Internet. As "netizens" on new media platforms, the Chinese audiences were *re*-empowered to vote. In 2006, China's government had banned Hunan TV's efforts to invite home viewers to vote for the winner in the finale of *Happy Girls*; however, in 2009, the Chinese people took part in voting sessions "outside" the official show parameters throughout the entire season. In 2009, Hunan TV promoted another period of voting, though not through text messages, that determined a final winner; instead, Hunan TV used online voting on the six biggest search engines—Tencent, Sina, Baidu, Wongyi, Jinying, and Sohu. As a result, Chinese consumers could go on each website and download any of the ringtones, and/or vote weekly for their favorite singer. The voting session thereby was open for an entire season.

Moreover, because Hunan TV recognized "netizens" as potential new kinds of contestants, the station invited these "netizens" to audition.[36] Unlike contestants in 2005's *Super Girl*, the contestants of 2009's *Happy Girls* could upload their videos on the six biggest search engines. In doing so, Hunan TV reached more and more potential stars than before since the contestants were no longer limited to geographical boundaries. As long as people have an interest and a camera, they can audition at any time and at any place. Therefore, *Happy Girls* attracted more than five

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[36] "In 2009's *Happy Girls,* Hunan TV calls for netizens' auditions for the first time," *HNR*, last modified May 15, 2009, http://www.hnr.cn/news/hndt/dt/201203/t20120326_44560.html.

thousand Chinese girls[37] who dreamed of auditioning. It is only because of the Internet that these Chinese girls were seen and heard, even if only for a few minutes.

Netizens' votes had a significant effect on the outcome of the competition. At the beginning of the show, the host would call out the two contestants who had earned the least number of votes on the Internet during the week and would give them one last chance to perform. Both contestants had the opportunity to solicit votes from the "public judges," which Hunan TV had selected from the netizens. The contestant with the most votes remained in the competition while the one with the least votes was eliminated. Unlike *American Idol*, where no studio audience members directly participate in eliminating the at-risk contestants, *Happy Girls* not only included netizens' votes in the opening elimination session but also empowered the netizens with the ability to vote out a contestant. Rather than asking experts to judge, Hunan TV created a platform where only the audience had the power to decide who would eventually be eliminated.

During the main segment of the show, the remaining singers perform for experts' votes and "votes" from the netizens in the form of downloaded ringtones to decide the order of the performances. While the audiences downloaded the ringtones of their favorite contestant, the accumulation of downloaded ringtones shaped the show's progress. Thereby, netizens' participation is also essential to this main contest. It is significant that Hunan TV never lets the four music experts be the ones who decide who will win this main contest alone. Instead, the judges' votes are combined with the number of netizen's downloaded ringtones to decide the result. The contestant who gets the best score in this main segment is made the cover girl on China's edition of *ELLE* magazine, becomes the face on the weekly released album (of the

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[37] Huichun Wang, "More than five thousand people audition for *Happy Girls* in five days," *Sina,* last modified May 18, 2009, http://ent.sina.com.cn/y/2009-05-18/11292524523.shtml.

contests' songs), and is featured on the homepage of China's six biggest websites for a week. Winning each week not only enhances the visibility of the performer but also can influence the results. Therefore, the contest highlights the audience's participation outside the show and its crucial role in shaping the competition.

3.2   BUYING INTO *HAPPY GIRLS*

Although Hunan TV has learned from the West's reality shows, it developed its own methods of engaging audience members with the show's content, in a more intense and detailed way. In this section, I discuss how Hunan TV engaged the Chinese media consumers with the show through multiple activities. In doing so, Hunan TV made sure that the Chinese people were not merely audience members but participants in the show.

Hunan TV borrowed American reality shows' format when it promoted its own program. For example, American reality shows often honor winners by putting them on the covers of major magazines. In *America's Next Top Model*, the winner of each season has the chance to be on the cover of *ELLE* magazine and also the opportunity to sign a contract with a major modeling agency. Media scholar Henry Jenkins, when writing about *American Idol*, refers to this new media marketing as the "affective economy:"[38]

> By affective economics, I mean a new configuration of marketing theory, still somewhat
> on the fringes but gaining ground within the media industry, which seeks to understand the

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[38] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 61-62.

emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions.

Marketing becomes more than how to get exposure for the product; it now includes how to involve the consumers. To encourage a large audience to participate, Hunan TV made ringtone downloading an essential part of the contest. This approach meant that the audience could not only decide the result of the competition but also were welcomed to participate, even when the show was not broadcasting. To support their favorite performer, the Chinese audience members were more than willing to download a ringtone that cost three Chinese yuan (45 cents USD) for each download.[39]

In addition, Hunan TV urged the viewers to send their favorite contestant's messages, which also cost three Chinese yuan. Rather than hiding those cheering messages in private, Hunan TV displayed the words from the viewing audience in public. Whenever the audience watched the show, the messages ceaselessly scrolled on the screen. This approach incorporated the audience into the media content. In this way, Hunan TV blurred the worlds between the off-stage and on-stage, Internet and reality, and created a space for people's words to be seen.

Learning from American reality shows, Hunan TV intended to "understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making"[40] and created its own method to involve the consumers. Instead of being the "mouthpiece of the government," China's media producers were listening to what their consumers wanted and offering new platforms to hear it. In generating media content, Hunan TV deliberately produced its programming with consumers in mind, even at times

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[39] "How to download *Happy Girls'* Ringtones?" *Baidu*, last modified August 9, 2009, http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/111055057.html.

[40] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 61-62.

asking for consumer participation. The changing relationship between the Chinese government and TV producers indicates the evolving relationship between China's consumers and television producers. The Chinese consumers, on the one hand, came to recognize their emerging power to voice a choice and to decide. The Chinese television producers, on the other hand, recognized the willingness of the consumers to be heard.

3.3   CHINESE NEW MEDIA CONSUMERS IN CYBERSPACE

In addition to welcoming the audience's responses through mobile text messages, Hunan TV also created multiple platforms on the Internet for audience members' interaction with each other. In this section, I examine Hunan TV's role in engaging the Chinese audience members with cyberspace and in assisting them in the creation of a public space. Because of Hunan TV, the Chinese people met with each other, generated their own media content, and used their interactions to establish a public space where they could establish collective identities and engage in individual free speech.

To garner more participation of audiences, Hunan TV connected with the new media platforms in every possible way and supported interaction between the contestants and audiences. In his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins recognizes that "[fans] are the most active segment of the media audience, one that refuses to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants."[41] Fans are the most energetic segment that emerged in response to media content. Hunan TV encouraged the Chinese

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[41] Ibid., 135.

Internet users to download "mango platform," a new media venue it created. On that venue, the viewers gained every piece of information concerning the competition: the clips and pictures of specific performers as well as the updates of the voting results. Furthermore, each contestant wrote a weekly journal on "mango platform" as a way to interact with her fans. In one blog, "Sorry, I Didn't Hear You," one of the contestants, Huang Ying, apologized to one of her fans for unintentionally ignoring the fan cheering for her outside of the studio:[42]

> I heard from my crew that there was one girl who called my name and wanted to give me a present. I didn't hear her voice so she disappointedly walked away. I wanted to say to that girl: "Thank you so much for your support! I feel lucky to have fans like you!"

This single post attracted comments from 475 fans and more than eleven thousand views. Many comments showed that Huang's fans appreciated her friendly attitude and kindness. One of the fans wrote, "Stop saying thank you, Huang. We are the ones who need to say thank you. It is because of you that 2011 became so meaningful."[43] Another post stated, "Dear Huang Ying, I was not interested in this year's *Happy Girls.* It is because of you and your humility that I started to follow. Please keep fighting."[44] "Mango platform" not only gave the audience more knowledge about the contestants' stage performances, but also extended the audience's viewing experience to their computer screens. Hunan TV, by creating a cyberspace that transcended broadcasting time and space, welcomed the audience's "asynchronous participation."[45]

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[42] Huang Ying, "Sorry, I Didn't Hear You," *Soho*, last modified July 23, 2009, http://huangying2009.blog.sohu.com/124503986.html.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 59.

Fans who were introduced to the cyberspace started to generate their own media content. For example, fans of Li Xiaoyun constructed a page on Tianya, one of China's largest online discussion boards. Whenever there were new voting activities, Li's fans would post and remind each other to vote. On her post, "Please vote before each of you sleeps tonight," Yinzi Tama wrote, "Everyone can cast ten votes per day. Please vote online or you are wasting your votes!"[46] Another person, 117.66.5, wrote, "I voted and my husband voted this morning. Twenty votes and counting. Fighting!" AzureHa posted, "It is my first time being a fan. I solicited all my roommates to vote!"[47] Yongnian Zheng points out, "Information technology, especially the Internet, has drastically changed [the] situation [of being 'atomized masses' in a totalitarian regime]."[48] Instead of being "atomized masses," these Chinese people gathered on a fresh platform of discussion boards on the Internet. These fans met each other on cyberspace with a same goal of voting for Li.

Although fans were brought to the online space by Hunan TV's advocacy of voting online, not all fans were satisfied with the space that Hunan TV allotted to them. Fans with the same favorite contestant gathered and called themselves "Yunners" (fans of Li Xiaoyun); they created a space belonging to them—an emerging public space that currently has more than twelve million posts and two hundred thousand members on it.[49] The Chinese audiences, no longer satisfied merely watching the show *Happy Girls*, became what Jenkins calls "new consumers" in new media era. They gathered together and took action. Jenkins wrote the following to explain these "new consumers":[50]

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[46] Yinzi Tama, "Please vote before each of you sleeps tonight," *Baidu*, last modified September 14, 2009, http://tieba.baidu.com/p/643147132.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Zheng, *Technological Empowerment*, 92.

[49] "Li Xiaoyun!" *Baidu*, last modified February 18, 2016, http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=李霄云&ie=utf-8&tp=0.

[50] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture,* 18-19.

If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active . . . If old

consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers are more socially connected. If

the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now

noisy and public.

These Chinese "new consumers," who lived throughout China and did not personally know each

other, found each other online, built an "imagined community,"[51] and identified themselves as

members of "Yunners." This community, crossing geographic boundaries, constructed a public

sphere and aimed to show the "Yunners'" support for Li Xiaoyun.

In such an emerging online public sphere, these voices expressed various points of view,

and competing voices debated each other. For example, the fans of Huang Ying, one of the most

promising candidates in 2009, canvassed online users about Huang's advantages, posting, "The

voice of Huang is dulcet and her personality is humble—Huang has all the qualities of being

China's top woman singer. She is worth investing money. Please! Go online and vote for her . . .

please!"[52] Another post described promising contestant, Li Xiaoyun, by saying, "It may be true

that Huang sings great, but Li sings more than great. Li *is* China's top singer, the one who has both

confidence and charisma on the stage. Vote Li instead of Huang!"[53] The advocates of these

opposing views, who both spoke with equal amounts of reason and passion, were willing to be

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[51] According to Benedict Anderson, "imagined community" is socially constructed and perceived by a group of people who may not even know each other but identify as a group. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983).

[52] "*Super Girl* Huang Ying," *Baidu,* last modified August 23, 2009, accessed July 30, 2015, http://tieba.baidu.com/p/629191262.

[53] Ibid.

heard online. No matter which position they endorsed, these individuals felt free to voice their choice.

The people's ability to voice their views was not common in China where the government suppressed anyone's diverse opinions. Only China's Internet provided a venue for the Chinese people to speak and be heard by a vast Chinese audience. When Guobin Yang, a Chinese media scholar, examines modern China's public sphere online, he uses Jürgen Habermas's concept of "public sphere": "a platform for rational debate among autonomous and rational individuals; space where the public are free to engage and disengage themselves from the debate; and a medium of communication which, like newspapers and books, is necessary for deliberation."[54] Through random individual "digital speeches," fans of *Happy Girls* have lobbied undecided people and mobilized them to enact their rights to vote. For the first time, the Chinese people feel free to talk about their views and to debate those views online with others. Through such public space emerging online, the Chinese people could express their dissenting views and vote for what they believe. As Guobin Yang points out, the Internet offers a great platform for "people [to] engage in cultural contention to express or oppose values, morality, lifestyles, and identities."[55] The Internet helped the Chinese people construct a public space online where they could develop collective identities and engage in individual free speech.

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[54] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 27-56, quoted in Guobin Yang, "The Internet and Civil Society in China: a preliminary assessment," *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 36 (2003): 461.

[55] Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 3.

3.4   FIREFLIES' CAMPAIGN

Hunan TV's reality shows helped create fans who devoted themselves from the first to the final airing of *Happy Girls*. In this section, I discuss collective voices, ones that are different from individual speeches that emerged online, and how those voices played a determining role in influencing the show's result. Hunan TV's *Happy Girls* represented more than an entertainment show; it also provided the Chinese audience with an emotional involvement from being involved in a campaign-like atmosphere.

To guarantee the success of their favorite contestant, Jiang Yingrong, Jiang's fans, who named themselves "Fireflies," constructed a "campaign group"[56] on Baidu, a Chinese search engine. Thanks to new media platforms and their convergence, Fireflies efficiently assembled and mobilized. They recruited their "officials" and "soldiers" on the Internet, calling for those "who have the most persevering and devoted heart to put their love of her [Jiang Yingrong] into practice." In her article "Imagining the Fan Democracy," Liesbet van Zoonen uses Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst's study of audience involvement to compare fan communities with political constituencies. Zoonen argues that if fans "could be considered, in other words, the voters . . . for a party or a candidate," "cultists" then can be seen as "members of a political party."[57] In this analogy, she points out not only the different layers of fans and cultists but also the similar mobilization and seriousness between the political and entertainment voting events.

Jiang's cultists, the Fireflies, showed their dedication to the voting process in one post, "Recruitment of Fireflies:" "If fireflies consist of a kingdom, the voters are the troops of the

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[56] "Jiang Yingrong's campaign group," *Baidu*, last modified October 26, 2009, http://tieba.baidu.com/home/main?un=江映蓉投票组&ie=utf-8&fr=pb&ie=utf-8.

[57] Liesbet van Zoonen, "Imagining the Fan Democracy," *European Journal of Communication* 19, no. 1 (2004), 44.

kingdom. Being one of the campaign crews, you are the brave warriors." The Fireflies divided themselves into bands: the band of "online voters" responsible for managing the strategy for voting online; the band of "fundraisers" responsible for gathering money for activities; and the band of "technical problem solvers" responsible for solving the voting problems that Fireflies encountered when voting online.[58] The Internet empowered cultists to take action, cooperate with each other, and demonstrate their influence on media content. In this "imagined community," each Firefly not only identified as a member of the "Fireflies kingdom" but also showed the collective voice of the Fireflies and their love for their Queen, Jiang.

For the finale of the season, the campaign group monitored six search engines' voting activities and updated every single moment of the campaign. In one post, "Emergency Call for the Last 30 Hours," the Fireflies in the voting group called for more votes until the last minute of the deadline:[59]

> Counting down for the final contest!!! Do you know situations of battlefields on each websites? Let me tell you: Our queen is always the second! For her, we've already fought for one and a half months. Should we give up in the last thirty hours? Persevere until the end; then we can celebrate at the end!!! How do we win the battle and laugh at the battlefield? The answer is: be determined, efficient, and brave! Go on each website, vote for her, and, at the same time, download ringtones.

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[58] "Recruitment of Fireflies," *Baidu*, accessed September 14, 2015, http://tieba.baidu.com/p/643090620?pid=6684910827&cid=#6684910827.

[59] "Emergency Call for the Last 30 Hours," *Baidu*, last modified September 3, 2009, http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=638558102.

In addition to such an inspiring speech, the voting group posted a self-made poll, showing their "queen's" always-second-place situation as well as the next move for the troops. For example, Jiang's campaign posted, "'Yunners' have given up the Wangyi website and decided to fight for the ringtone downloading. Our group will not give up anything! Our main campaign group will take care of Wangyi and other Fireflies' targets, including Jinying and Soho websites." In five minutes, another member of the Fireflies, Zheng Xiaopiao, updated: "The Jinying website is not available. It automatically shut down . . . Call for the 'technical group's' help!" The technical group immediately responded: "Problem solved! Keep voting."[60] By working as a group, the Fireflies not only solved the problems in a timely manner, but also used the Internet to observe the situations of other contestants in order to determine the best strategy for themselves. The thirty-hour mission demonstrated the cooperation and determination of the Fireflies.

Figure 2. Fireflies' self-made poll

The red squares indicate the status of Jiang. Available from: *Baidu,* http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=638558102 (accessed February 4, 2016).

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[60] "The last plunge and the tips for voting," *Baidu*, last modified September 4, 2009, http://tieba.baidu.com/p/638832828?pid=6639162544&cid=#6639162544.

In her article "Imagining the Fan Democracy," Zoonen points out the "similarity between the fan communities around entertainment 'genres' (whether they are stars, programmers or styles) and the political constituencies around candidates, parties or ideologies."[61] Both entertainment and political voting activities "require a commitment to candidates and a willingness to vote in elections,"[62] and "both are concerned with knowledge, discussion, participation, imagination of alternatives, and implementation." [63] More importantly, both aim to fulfill an "emotional constitution"[64] on which voters build their imaginations and to realize their emotional expectation through the participation of the entire process of voting: soliciting, debating, and casting. Even though the Chinese people are not allowed to vote in a political sphere, they fulfilled their desire to participate in a campaign when they solicited votes for their favorite contestant.

For the Fireflies, *Happy Girls* is not only a show but also a campaign they must win. As Goubin Yang observes, "[since] China achieved full-function connectivity to the Internet in 1994 . . . Ordinary people engage in a broad range of political action and find a new sense of self, community, and empowerment."[65] Through online voting activities, these Chinese fans discovered their passion, met their peers, and gained empowerment. Therefore, the voting process did more than entertain the fans; it also served as a military mission they vowed to win. Such a "military campaign" could happen only because of the Internet, which allowed Chinese audiences to

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[61] Zoonen, "Imagining the Fan Democracy," 39.

[62] Ibid., 42-43.

[63] Ibid., 39.

[64] Ibid., 49.

[65] Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 2.

efficiently assemble and solve problems. Because of the concentrated votes and devoted fans, Jiang

survived all contests and won the final, becoming 2009's *Happy Girls* champion.[66]

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[66] "Jiang Yingrong won the 2009 championship, Li Xiaoyun earned second place, and Huang Ying took third place," *Sina*, last modified September 4, 2009, http://ent.sina.com.cn/y/2009-09-04/23302684815.shtml.

4.0   2011'S *HAPPY GIRLS*—SMARTPHONES AND MEDIA CONVERGENCE

In 2011, Hunan TV's *Happy Girls*, in combination with a new media technology—the smartphone—and a new media platform—Weibo, a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter—raised the participation of fans to its peak. Rather than limiting itself to television and computer screens, Hunan TV instead brought China's media to another stage: through smartphones, it gave people 24/7 access to the media content on Weibo. Unlike computers, smartphones solved the problems of geographic limitations and increased users' mobility. In this section, I argue that Hunan TV, as a media pioneer, used smartphones to circulate media content and brought the Chinese audience to the world of media convergence.

China entered the mobile 3G era in 2009. As Jing Wang and Chung-tai Cheng point out in their article "The history of the mobile phone in China," "[After] the 3G licenses were issued, the number of mobile netizens in China had increased significantly."[67] From then on, the Chinese people were able to consume information from their portable mobile phones. Fans of *Happy Girls* now had the opportunity to garner media content circulating on their phones, even when they were commuting to and from work or school. Just as Henry Jenkins acknowledges that the smartphone has become the center of the lives of 21st century Americans,[68] so did Hunan TV also recognize the smartphone's potential as a new technology that provides its consumers with 24/7 involvement. In 2011, Hunan TV, instead of broadcasting once a week, broadcast all day for seventy days, 1,680 hours, both online and on mobile phones. Furthermore, Hunan TV cooperated with four Weibo

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[67] Jing Wang and Chung-tai Cheng, "The history of the mobile phone in China," in *Mobile Communication and Greater China,* ed. Rodney Wai-chi Chu, Leopoldina Fortunati, Pui-lam Law, and Shanhua Yang (Florence: Routledge, 2012), 75.

[68] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 4.

companies—Soho, Sina, Tencent, and Wangyi—posting every detail of *Happy Girls* (from the timetable to competition pictures).

Also, Weibo helps Hunan TV in promoting the show. Like Facebook and Twitter, Weibo provides every user with a personal page. Users on Weibo can "like," "forward," and "comment" on posts created by either the users themselves or by others. Instead of counting the number of downloaded ringtones as it did in 2009's *Happy Girls*, Hunan TV asked for the highest numbers of "forwarding" of the singers' updates to decide which singers would face possible elimination for each contest. For example, Liu Xin, one of the contestants in 2011's *Happy Girls*, gained more than one-hundred-and-twenty thousand forwards[69] in one week; this support saved her far from the elimination. Also, fans' "forwarding" enhanced the visibility of the contestant they supported. In one of her posts, Liu wrote: "Today, I saw a banner from Liaoning, Fujian, and Shanxi regions. Don't tell me you came from these far places to support me. I cannot express how touched I am! I will keep singing hard!" Liu's fans forwarded Liu's words to others, resulting in one fan posting, "Liu, you are the best. You work so hard. The championship belongs to you." Another fan, whose online name is I love Liu Xin, also forwarded the post and added: "Remember, you also have fans from Beijing."[70] Fans did more than just comment on the post; they circulated the media content by combining and recombining their own meanings and interpretations of the text. As a result, Hunan TV made sure that it reached the largest audience pool—not the limited fans who downloaded the most ringtones but the fans who simultaneously created and circulated their voices on media content.

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[69] "Semi-final," *Happy Girls,* Hunan TV, season 2, semi-final one, directed by Hao Ma, aired June 18, 2011, television.

[70] "Liu Xin Weibo Page," *Tencent*, last modified September 8, 2011, http://t.qq.com/lx0608CS?mode=0&id=103019125821356&pi=10&time=1315751930.

Consequently, Hunan TV introduced fans to a world of "media convergence," a broadcasting world that ran for twenty-four hours on air, online, and on mobile. Such a world not only displayed media content but also intertwined such content with the Chinese consumers' everyday lives. For example, the Chinese audiences daily checked their phones while replying to the pop-up messages showing the winner of an episode: that is, the audiences commented on both the pictures and video of the show after they had watched the episode online or on mobile. The Chinese viewers watched the show and also provided their own meaning of it by commenting, sharing, and discussing every aspect of the show. They transformed from viewers of the show to people who "created" their own voice on media content. Jenkins writes the following about modern media culture: "Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences."[71] Media convergence not only created a "participatory audience" but also strengthened this audience's relationship with the media content.

4.1   VISUALIZING A CHINESE SOCIETY

Learning from previous enthusiastic fans' online activities and recognizing Chinese netizens' willingness to be both heard and seen, Hunan TV increased its in-studio audience from hundreds to three thousand and invited individual Weibo users to serve as grassroots judges. In addition, Hunan TV selected one thousand in-studio viewers from every province to vote. Through these actions, Hunan TV created a "Chinese society" on stage. In this section, I show how media content,

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[71] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 15.

which circulated in the world of media convergence, enhanced its power and flowed back to where it began—the studio. I investigate the following three groups that demonstrate different voices empowered by the media flow: the three thousand in-studio audience, the Weibo judges, and the one thousand voting viewers. Because of media convergence, Hunan TV was able to establish a condensed "Chinese society" and to bring to the stage an intense online debate and solicitation.

Because earlier fans were not in the studio, they had to solicit votes for their favorite performer through online discussion boards. However, the three thousand in-studio fans in 2011 were able to directly encourage their preferred contestant and use the camera to beg for votes. Hunan TV did not present these in-studio audience members as merely background; instead, they allowed them to introduce the contestants and songs the contestants were going to perform. One of Yang Yang's fans proposed to his fiancée before he introduced Yang Yang who was about to sing *Please Marry Me Tomorrow*. Fans of Liu Xin also provided their videos to be played as background while Liu sang on the stage. Fans not only bounced among mobile, computer, and TV screens, but also they became part of the media content in the studio; they wanted to be intertwined with the performances.[72] Hunan TV did more than scroll the supportive words of fans on the bottom of the screen; it made the fans a visible part of the show. Media convergence encouraged and heightened the fans' relationship with the media content. The show became more than a platform for performers who dreamed of becoming superstars; more importantly, it served as a means for creating a collective movement that combined fans and contestants.

Thanks to the media convergence, Chinese people's public voice online is able to convert into visibility on the stage. Fans of Liu Xin, one of the most popular contestants in 2011's *Happy*

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[72] "Top 13 Perform," *Happy Girls,* Hunan TV, season 2, semi-final three, directed by Hao Ma, aired June 25, 2011, television.

Girls, assembled themselves in the real world. On Weibo, the members of the fans' page showed the power of their collective voice by following every event related to Xin, having a slogan for each event and announcing each event's importance to the members.[73] The fans of Xin even conveyed their own importance by boldly stating, "In tomorrow's competition, popularity is everything! Xin sings, and 'Xinners' (the nickname of Xin's fans) hail for her." When Xin performed the following day, Xinners made the loudest cheers in the audience. In effect, Xinners not only gathered online to create their collective meaning of media content but also made sure that such content would be heard and seen in studio. In the world of media convergence, the Chinese people gave themselves the power to assemble as well as made a public voice heard and an assembly seen.

Recognizing the Chinese audience's eagerness to be involved in the media content, Hunan TV visualized a show whose on-stage contestants and participating audience members represented a wide-range of Chinese society. More than displaying specific contestant's fans from Weibo, Hunan TV also selected the Weibo judges from the Internet. These judges represented a diverse population, including high school students and bloggers, photographers and traditional Chinese physicians, and others. At times, the Weibo judges expressed views that differed from those of the professional judges. One of the selected Weibo judges, Li Chengpeng, pointed out the professional judges' biased comments about the performance of one of the contestants, Su Miaoling. In the top twenty competition, Li stated the following: "Although the professional judges said that Su's performance is too plain, I do not agree . . . I think 'calmness' is the quality that makes her performance stand out. We don't need exciting and noisy performances all the time."[74] This speech

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[73] "Xin's Official Weibo page," *Weibo*, accessed August 1, 2015, http://weibo.com/liuxinhouyuanhui?stat_date=201109#feedtop.

[74] "Semi-final," *Happy Girls*, television.

helped the audience to recognize the quality that the professional judges ignored and enabled Su to win over the crowd. Li's successful speech bewildered the professional judges; Su eventually won fourth place, validating the Weibo judge's viewpoint.

He Jiong, the host of *Happy Girls*, introduced the Weibo judges at the beginning of every show as "representatives of the grassroots' views, unlike the professional judges who contributed the experts' perspective."[75] When the Weibo judges could not make their decisions, they often asked Weibo users to decide for them. For example, during a live broadcast, Zhao Lihua, a Weibo judge, posted, "I like Lu Yi. I also like Su Miaoling,"[76] and asked for Weibo users' help to make a decision between the two. Zhao announced to the audience a little while later, "This post attracted 3,364 forwards in a short time . . . Su got slightly more than Lu, so I vote for Su."[77] Having computers in front of them, the Weibo judges connected to the Weibo space, thus maintaining a strong relationship with the fans online. Therefore, Hunan TV not only synced the world of the Internet and studio but also offered as many opportunities as possible for the Chinese people's voices to be included in the decision-making.

In 2011's *Happy* Girls, Hunan TV did more than welcome the Weibo judges; it enlarged its studio to thousands of square meters to include the most important participants in-studio: one thousand voting viewers. In its advertisement, Hunan TV also promoted the advantage of being a voting viewer: "What professional judges say does not count. What *I* say in the studio does count."[78] Each week, the Chinese audiences could get on the official website to gain a ticket to the

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[75] "Top 8 Perform," *Happy Girls,* Hunan TV, season 2, episode 4, directed by Hao Ma, aired August 5, 2011, television.

[76] Zhao Lihua, "Tencent Weibo post," *Tencent,* June 18, 2011, 21:13pm, http://t.qq.com/zhaolihua?date=20110619&mode=0&id=1115063306471&pi=3&time=1308405638.

[77] "Semi-final," *Happy Girls*, television.

[78] "Hunan TV 2011 *Happy Girls* Voting Promotion," *YouTube*, last modified July 9, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sj1wVnDn5-8.

studio, earning themselves the chance to practice converting online voting to in-studio voting which played a determining role in every episode's result. Recognizing the activeness of voting online, Hunan TV offered the chance to vote on stage and emphasized the sacredness of owning the right to vote in studio. More importantly, Hunan TV equated the spirit of voting with expressing a voice and promised the audience members that it valued each vote just as a democracy values each vote in an election.

Figure 3. One thousand voting viewers divided into five sections

"Top 8 Perform," *Happy Girls,* Hunan TV, season 2, episode 4, directed by Hao Ma, aired August 5, 2011, television. Available from: *Youtube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzdlab3UTYc (accessed February 2, 2016).

In the 2011 finals, the station called for one thousand voting viewers from China's twenty-six provinces, thereby creating a "Chinese society" on the stage. As the host He said: "Although

Hunan TV cannot include all the Chinese people, we selected audience members from every province, covering ages from eighteen to seventy-one. We include as many diverse voices as we can from the Chinese people."[79] Rather than demonstrating one dominant voice of the experts, the studio created a public space that collected voices from a diverse public. Not merely limiting the voting rights to elites, Hunan TV selected online ordinary Chinese people from various backgrounds representing different provinces. Therefore, when someone became one of the one thousand voting viewers, Hunan TV guaranteed that he or she had the ability and right to make a decision.

In the world of media convergence, media content did not serve only an entertainment role, but rather, it flew across media platforms and altered people's understanding of individual and collective identities, making heard individual and public voices. Henry Jenkins writes in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collides*: "Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives."[80] Rather than letting media producers decide everything concerning the show, media convergence "alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences."[81] Chinese audiences' activities online drove the creation of a media content in which they could be visible on stage, hailing for their favorite contestant and participating in in-person

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[79] *"*Top 11 Perform*," Happy Girls,* Hunan TV, season 2, episode 1, directed by Hao Ma, aired July 15, 2011, television.
[80] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture,* 3-4.
[81] Ibid.,15.

voting and debating sessions. Because of media convergence, Chinese audiences learned how to make their collective voices not only be heard online but also be visible on stage.

4.2   BRINGING THE ONLINE CAMPAIGN TO THE STAGE

Not only did Hunan TV give Chinese individuals from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to be heard and seen, but also it brought the online campaign to the stage. In introducing the soliciting session (by the contestants), debating session (between the Weibo judges), and the voting session (of one thousand voting viewers), Hunan TV fulfilled the Chinese audience's desire to participate in a democratic campaign. In this section, I argue that media convergence not only helped the circulation of media content but also enabled Hunan TV to mobilize fans and translate an online campaign to the stage.

In the world of media convergence, the media power does not follow the top-down distribution but rather it includes more of a bottom-up system and mutual influence between media producers and consumers than in the past. Hunan TV, learning from fans' activities, such as Fireflies' online efforts, prepared an in-studio campaign to engage the Chinese audience in decision-making on stage. In 2011's *Happy Girls*, Hunan TV frequently included as many voting sessions in the show as possible. Compared to the process of *American Idol*, the eliminating segment of *Happy Girls* occupied a great proportion of the show. In *Happy Girls*, the Chinese professional judges only decided which contestant was safe to stay in the first segment of the show. In the remaining three segments, Hunan TV put at-risk contestants on the stage, letting different groups of people—the contestants, the Weibo judges, and the individual voting viewers—decide who should leave the contest. Hunan TV deliberately limited the number of at-risk contestants to

two, so the voters could easily make a choice. For example, in the second segment, the Weibo judges voted by saying which contestant of the two they supported more; in the third segment, the safe contestants took turns standing in between the two at-risk contestants and voting by raising the hand of the contestant they supported. By repeatedly showing the procedure of making choices, Hunan TV made the voting sessions central to the show.

To make the entire voting session more like a real campaign, Hunan TV created a soliciting session of contestants. Two at-risk contestants tried to reclaim votes and to intensify the campaign by reminding voters of their slogans. Much like a real political campaign, each contestant had her slogan and nickname. Wang Yijie, whose nickname was "Beauty Wang," had the slogan, "I got the peaceful singing quality. Vote for me if you like me." Another contestant, Yu Jiali, also known as "High Pitch Yu," had as her slogan, "I got talent in singing high pitch. Vote for me if you support me."[82] The "I got" slogans not only reminded the audience of the contestant's quality but also evoked within the voters the passion to support the "right" contestant. Hunan TV brought the online campaign to the stage, letting contestants solicit the votes themselves and enhance the campaign-like atmosphere in the studio. As Zoonen points out, the soliciting of votes in the entertainment shows and political events "rest[s] on similar emotional investments that are intrinsically linked to rationality, and lead—in concert—to 'affective intelligence.'"[83] Contestants advocating for votes from the viewers resembled candidates calling for votes from the electorates in a democratic campaign. Therefore, Hunan TV, by evoking the voting viewers' affection of making a "better" choice, taught the Chinese audience the importance of voting with a good reason.

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[82] "Top 8 Perform," *Happy Girls*, television.

[83] Zoonen, "Imagining the Fan Democracy," 39.

In an effort to intensify the voting in the entertainment industry, Hunan TV created a debating session (lasting either ninety or one-hundred-and-twenty seconds) for the Weibo judges to solicit votes from the voting viewers. Each Weibo judge had the opportunity to endorse the contestant he or she supported and to explain why voting viewers should also support that contestant. Frequently, the Weibo judges emphasized one specific contestant's singing ability and how the performance of a specific contestant had touched them the most. For example, the Weibo judges engaged in a heated debate during the fourth episode, in which Yu Jiali and Wang Yijie were the at-risk contestants. Xu, one of the Weibo judges, supported Yu and said: "I like Yu! Her voice is so powerful just like a fighter aircraft, achieving higher and higher pitch." Nevertheless, another Weibo judge, Teacher Sisi, disagreed: "It is true that Yu has a high pitch; yet, Wang can sing higher . . . right?"[84] Here, Teacher Sisi not only endorsed Wang's singing ability but also sought support from the thousands of in-studio viewers. The response of the in-studio audience resonated, giving the victory to Wang.

Reality shows offered a platform that allowed Chinese audiences to hear different persons' views, a concept foreign in China where the government suppressed anyone's dissenting opinions. On such a platform, the Chinese audience debated and defined what qualities a star should have and which contestant would be the next top Chinese female singer. As Chinese media scholar Shuyu Kong notes, the Chinese reality show "has articulated a cultural public sphere for debating competing values in contemporary Chinese society through affective engagement." [85] When thousands of people gathered in a studio, the studio became an Athenian square where people were allowed to deliver and exchange individual views. Only China's reality shows were able to display

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[84] "Top 8 Perform," *Happy Girls*, television.

[85] Shuyu Kong, *Popular Media, Social Emotion and Public Discussion in Contemporary China* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 99.

such heated debates with different arguments. Rather than letting the government define where people could gather and debate, the Chinese people reconstructed and redefined their public sphere through their participation in a reality show.

In such a cultural public sphere, the Chinese people did not define themselves by geographic provinces; instead, they defined themselves as participants of a public discussion. The show not only became a means for the Chinese audiences to express their opinion and support a specific candidate, but also created a consensus within the Chinese audiences. In their book *New Television, Globalization, and the East Asian Cultural Imagination*, Michael Keane, Anthony Y. H. Fung, and Albert Moran recognize the room which reality shows opened for the Chinese people's voices: "*Idol* formats offer a space for 'safe multiculturalism.' Ethnic differences were presented not as radically conflicting, but as consensual."[86] Reality shows provided the right platform for the Chinese audience members to experience and participate in a public discussion in a public space. Instead of only including monolithic views, the Chinese reality shows collected different points of view from ordinary Chinese people.

Both the soliciting session of at-risk contestants and the debating session of the Weibo judges set the foundation for the voting by one thousand viewers. Hunan TV divided the one thousand voters into five sections, with two hundred voters in a row. The host then explained the voting process in a detailed way:[87]

> Host He: "After hearing from the Weibo judges, it is time for the voting audience to make their decision. Let's vote!"

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[86] Michael Keane, Anthony Y. H. Fung, and Albert Moran, *New Television, Globalisation, and the East Asian Cultural Imagination* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 134.

[87] "Top 8 Perform*,*" *Happy Girls*, television.

Host Wang: "You are the ones who can decide which contestant stays or goes . . ."

He: "If you support Yu, please press button A; if you support Wang, please press button

   B. Please keep in mind—A for Yu, B for Wang."

Wang: "Attention, section one. Please Vote . . ."

After each section voted, the results immediately appeared on the screen; the computer calculated both the valid votes and how many votes each contestant earned. The screen showed the "A" votes in pink and the "B" votes in blue; the invalid votes (the votes that came in late) had no color. The voting session of the voting viewers lasted for more than twenty minutes. The host repeated the voting procedure, and counted and accumulated votes section by section. By televising the public participation to the real world, Hunan TV made the power of ordinary people's voices evident to the viewing public.

Figure 4. Counting one thousand votes

Computer calculated valid votes, coloring who voted "A" pink and who voted "B" blue. The votes that came in late had no color. "Top 8 Perform," *Happy Girls,* Hunan TV, season 2, episode 4, directed by Hao Ma, aired August 5, 2011, television. Available from: *Youtube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzdlab3UTYc (accessed February 2, 2016).

Rather than letting people quietly vote, Hunan TV visualized the entire process on the screen. Both the in-studio and out-of-studio audience members witnessed a displayed campaign that valued the choices of the Chinese people. According to Robert Putnam, "Voting . . . embodies the most fundamental democratic principle of equality."[88] In China, such democracy emerged in China's reality shows: these shows introduced the Chinese people to the concept and procedure of voting. Mr. Hu, one of the professional judges, pointed out the importance of the voting audience's endorsement: "I hope that you, the one thousand voting audience members, can cherish your voice. Other viewers are not as lucky as you are; they do not have the chance to vote. Decide with you heart which contestant impressed you more."[89] Mr. Hu perceived the viewing audience's vote of saving the contestant as a sacred one. Hunan TV did not perceive the Chinese audiences as a "mass" of people; rather, it valued each person and voice by emphasizing the concept of "each vote counts."

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[88] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), quoted in Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Ramona S. McNeal, *Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 67.

[89] "Top 8 Perform," *Happy Girls*, television.

Figure 5. Voting process

Rather than letting voting viewers quietly vote, Hunan TV visualized the whole process on the stage. "Top 8 Perform*,*" *Happy Girls,* Hunan TV, season 2, episode 4, directed by Hao Ma, aired August 5, 2011, television. Available from: *Youtube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzdlab3UTYc (accessed February 2, 2016).

The in-studio campaign of *Happy Girls* reached its peak in the last segment when the one thousand voting viewers finally had the chance to make their decisions. The soliciting, debating, and voting sessions composed a campaign on stage. As Michael Keane, Anthony Y. H. Fung, and Albert Moran argue, the fantasy of democratic voting in China's reality shows fulfills the Chinese audience's desire to experience democracy: "The formula is much the same, while the rhetoric of viewer democracy is even more appealing in a country where voting for politicians is not endemic or central to social relations."[90] Chinese audience members engaged in free speech, public debate, and the practice of voting. It is because of the show that the Chinese people had a chance to experience a democratic behavior that they thought was exclusive to a democratic country; it is because of the show that democracy is less idealized and distant from the Chinese people.

The two-and-half-hour show, which began at ten p.m., achieved its peak at midnight when the voting session process began. The host, He, encouraged people to vote: "Dear voters, don't

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[90] Keane, Fung, and Moran, *New Television, Globalisation, and the East Asian Cultural Imagination*, 129.

give up your voting rights! Take the opportunity to express yourself! Let's walk out of the studio with a promising tomorrow!"[91] As the voting audience members made their selections, they probably imagined themselves as representatives of the Chinese people selecting a better tomorrow.

4.3   ON-GOING CAMPAIGN

It became clear that the voice of the Chinese people determined the champion of the *Happy Girls* competition. Even though the most talked-about and popular contestant, Liu Xin, lost her chance in the first round of the final, the competition's winner, Duan Linxi, nevertheless showed the power of the public voice. Not only did the competition acknowledge Duan's singing ability, but it also recognized the power and support coming from the majority of the Chinese audience. Indeed, Duan did get—and rightly deserved—the highest number of both the judges' and the audiences' votes. More importantly, she represented the Chinese people's willingness to make their voices heard and to make their decisions. The opening line of Hunan TV's newsletter emphasizes this point: "The selection of this champion of the 2011 *Happy Girls* resulted from the most participatory and fair competition that Chinese television ever had."[92] This statement made clear the satisfaction of the Chinese audience to decide their top woman singer through their public voice—a collective voice collected on air, online, and on the mobile phone. China's government was alarmed by its people's active voting and was disturbed by the readiness of the Chinese people to decide for

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[91] "Top 8 Perform," *Happy Girls*, television.

[92] Yujuan He, "The selection of this champion of the 2011 *Happy Girls* resulted from the most participatory and fair competition that Chinese television ever had," *Hunan TV*, last modified September 16, 2011, http://www.mgtv.com/c/20110916/2236482432.html.

themselves what they wanted. As a result, in 2011, China's government again banned Hunan TV's singing competition show, thereby prohibiting the voices of ordinary people from being heard. Although the government claimed their action resulted from the show exceeding the broadcast time, the real reason was the show's democratic spirit.[93]

Even though the Chinese government could prevent Hunan TV from broadcasting, it could not stop the Chinese people from producing and consuming online media, and/or sharing and discussing via new media platforms. Using this media convergence, the Chinese audiences today continue to make their voices heard. They continue to give meaning to some earlier media content by sharing information on Weibo and discussing *Super Girl* of 2005 and *Happy Girls* of 2009 and 2011. More so, the Chinese audiences have come to promote their own voting sessions on Weibo, asking group members such things as who their favorite singer was in *Super Girls* of 2005 as well as *Happy Girls* of 2009 and 2011.[94] Fans of *Super Girl* even created a voting website claiming that "we don't need judges and message votes" and aiming at conducting a more "fair" voting session of their own.[95] It is evident that the Chinese audiences not only are continuing to participate in the show through the new media platforms but also are making new meaning—their own—of media content. In short, even today the Chinese consumers are actively interacting with each other in the world of media convergence; they are still constructing and respecting their individual and collective voices.

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[93] "No voting please, we're Chinese," *The Economist,* last modified September 22, 2011, accessed July 30, 2015, http://www.economist.com/node/21530166.

[94] "If you can go back to ten years before, who is your *Super Girl*?" *Weibo,* accessed March 2, 2016, http://vote.weibo.com/poll/137072495.

[95] "Who was your favorite contestant who did not win in 2006 *Super Girl?*" *Sina*, accessed September 4, 2015, http://bbs.sina.com.cn/zt/w/yizhu.html.

In 2016, *Super Girl* is again auditioning, and Hunan TV is bringing its media industries to another level. Hunan TV is not only integrating different media platforms—Mango TV and Tianyu media—but also cooperating with other countries—America, Canada, Australia, and others.[96] By making episodes available online, Hunan TV expects to offer its audience the ability to participate in the show by voting while watching the show.[97] In doing so, Hunan TV develops another method to solve the government's ban on the voting of an audience outside the studio. It is because of today's new media convergence that Hunan TV can revive *Super Girl* in China. *Super Girl*'s slogan "Every person's dream counts" explains Hunan TV's recognition of the importance of every Chinese person's voice.[98]

[96] "*Super Girl* cooperates with other countries," *China News Service,* last modified February 2, 2016, http://www.chinanews.com/yl/2016/02-02/7744292.shtml.

[97] "2016 *Super Girl:* 'Every person's dream counts'," *Phoenix New Media*, last modified January 4, 2016, http://ent.ifeng.com/a/20160104/42555951_0.shtml.

[98] Ibid.

5.0   LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES OF DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

The success of Hunan TV's reality shows benefits from the technological empowerment generated from media convergence. It is because of the Internet that Hunan TV was able to overcome the government's ban, extend the circulation of its program, and even continue its voting activities. Nevertheless, the democracy emerging by way of media convergence has its limits. In her article "Who needs democracy if we can pick our favorite girl? *Super Girl* as media spectacle," Bingchun Meng argues, "The unprecedented success of *Super Girl* was not merely a fluke, but had everything to do with the state-initiated pro-market media policies."[99] It is true that Hunan TV followed the "pro-market media policies" executed by the government. Nevertheless, Hunan TV did not follow media's traditional role of being the "government's mouthpiece." Furthermore, the continuous bans from the government demonstrate the negotiable role of China's media producers in relation to the government policies. Media convergence, altering the existing relationship between the government, producers, and customers, complicated the hierarchal top-down system of China's media.

It is also true that Hunan TV aimed at generating profits, not necessarily instigating democratic participation and discussion. As Bingchun Meng continues to argue, "[All] the production decisions were still made by a state-owned, market-driven television station for the ultimate purpose of generating more profits."[100] Yet, in the 21st century's media convergence, profits do not merely rely on the producers but also heavily depend on the active participation in

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[99] Bingchun Meng, "Who needs democracy if we can pick our favorite girl? *Super Girl* as media spectacle," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 2, no. 3 (2009): 262.
[100] Ibid., 268.

the shows and the social connections outside the shows by the consumers; this economic logic is rooted in the principle of democratic participation. The continuous bans from the government further demonstrate the "democratic spirit" of Chinese audiences' active and intense participation; the revivals of the shows also signify that the media producers value the consumers' participation as the center of reality shows. The media producers in the new media era cannot dictate what the consumers watch, but rather, they have to listen to what the consumers desire.

Media and its convergence have created a new kind of public—that freely bounce among different media to express their voices. As Guobin Yang writes, "[Although] democracy as a political system remains an ideal and not a reality, at the grassroots level, people are already practicing and experimenting with forms of citizen democracy."[101] Although the government could ban the shows, the media's impact has already occurred, and the Chinese audience has learned something from the shows. Through media convergence, new Chinese consumers already circulated, discussed, and expressed their views about the shows. The government's bans did not succeed in limiting the Chinese audiences' democratic participation in and outside the show.

It is because of the Internet that the Chinese people are able to experience voting sessions again. Although China's government also has control over the Internet, the battle in the Internet world between the Chinese government and its people is not necessarily a zero-sum game.[102] Rather, as Yongnian Zheng argues, "Internet development is mutually empowering and transforming between the state and society."[103] As he furthers, "The Internet is not only a tool that can be used by both the state and society in their interaction. More importantly, the Internet is a

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[101] Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 220-221.
[102] Zheng, *Technological Empowerment*, 10.
[103] Ibid., 11.

new and unexplored political realm where both the state and society try to expand their own political space."[104] Hunan TV's introduction of the online campaign to the stage was a great example illustrating how the Internet and media convergence have empowered the Chinese society to create their public sphere. In one online post titled "*Happy Girls* violates Chinese law; yet, the Chinese people gain true happiness from the show," a famous blogger, Dalin Sheng, put his message in a bold font to emphasize his voice on the issue: "I dislike those who use power to ban things they think are 'low brow;' I dislike those who ban people from being 'happy!'"[105] These Chinese people are not merely passive audience members but active consumers that are able to express themselves both on media content and in their real lives in response to the government.

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[104] Ibid., 10.

[105] Dalin Sheng, "*Happy Girls* violates Chinese law; yet, the Chinese people gain true happiness from the show," *Sina*, last modified September 4, 2009, *http*://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_53e839d20100f1tu.html.

6.0   CONCLUSION

In 2016, *Super Girl* is again auditioning. This signals the reality show as a negotiable realm among China's government, producers, and consumers. When China's government embraced a market economy from the West, it accepted an economy that emerged in the spirit of democracy rooted in the people's voices. Because of media convergence, China's media did not follow the top-down hierarchal system, but rather, it included more of a bottom-up system than before. The Chinese people had learned how to vote and debate by their uses of multiple media platforms and their consuming of the reality shows. They had experienced the democratic behavior that they thought only a democratic country could have.

It is exciting to look back at these early factions of reality TV viewers to see the origin of the people's voice. Those initial groups of online users—who learned to use their voices and to interact with the voices of others—came together under their own banners, defined themselves, and raised their voices to assemble and actively mobilize a public space online. Those individuals brought to the studio figured out how to effectively express themselves on stage and how to debate with and persuade others to vote with them in support of their candidate. Voting viewers learned how to express their choices. These early public voices stimulated and encouraged others to raise their voices to also be heard.

It is evident that the Chinese people are creating its cultural public space by their participation in the show. Jim McGuigan writes about the construction of a cultural public sphere in the late-modern world:[106]

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[106] Jim McGuigan, "The Cultural Public Sphere," in *Cultural Analysis* (London: SAGE Publication, 2010), 15.

In the late-modern world, the cultural public sphere is not confined to a republic of letters [. . .or] 'serious' art, classical, modern or, for that matter, postmodern. Rather, it includes the various channels and circuits of mass popular culture and entertainment, the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life.

Chinese people today recognize the power and value of making their public voices heard through their participation in both popular entertainment and in cyberspace.

Indeed, although Hunan TV borrowed voting session procedures from Western reality shows, it developed its own way to solicit votes and conduct debate sessions. The Chinese reality shows became a platform for the Chinese people to construct their groups, to build their public sphere, and to voice their beliefs. As Jenkins argues, "Who wins *American Idol*, in the end, doesn't matter that much in the great scheme of things, but the debates about *Idol* voting are debates about the terms of audience participation in America media."[107] What matters to Hunan TV's singing reality shows is not just creating a star, but rather, what matters are the debates concerning democratic participation in a cultural public space. Not only did Hunan TV sell a show that seemed to be "real," but also it sold to Chinese audiences a dream of being seen and heard, a new way for them to get involved, a venue in which they could find the courage to express their voices. Even today, Chinese consumers are actively interacting with each other in the public sphere they created. The Chinese people's voices do not disappear, but instead become firmer and more powerful.

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[107] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 92.

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