A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY, MEDIA, AND POPULAR MUSIC IN THE VOICE OF CHINA

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ABSTRACT

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This manuscript explores the relationships among identity, media, and popular music in Chinese society through an examination of a televised singing competition franchise, *The Voice of China*. I attempt to understand what role popular culture, in the form of a contemporary popular cultural product, plays in Chinese people’s everyday life and how the show is a site where Chinese people articulate, interrogate and negotiate aspects of identity. I provide a textual analysis to interpret the meaningful details of each episode while employing a critical-cultural approach to understand the socio-historical contexts and the online discourse that are conducive to the uniqueness of the international franchise. More specifically, I examine how societal discourses on the blind audition and the voting systems of the show reveal growing public awareness of and concern with issues of equity and fairness in the cultural arena of traditional aesthetic standards as well as the societal arena of electoral politics. I also explore how the show reinforces the ruling Party’s appropriations of nationalism in a sophisticated way to highlight a unified and supreme national voice, how it reflects both a loosening grip of the central government on gender representation and a growing social leniency toward gender diversity, and finally how the voice diversity was constructed by individuals who are in possession of or in need of various forms of social capital and who are from geographically diverse and economically disparate social backgrounds. I point out that *The Voice of China* offers a prime site to understand how the discourses of politics, (trans)nationality, ethnicity, gender, and class intersect with each other in the situated context and hopefully, such a discussion can raise the cultural awareness to challenge institutional power and social norms in order to hear the diversified voices in Chinese society.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION: POPULAR CULTURE, SINGING COMPETITION, AND THE VOICE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop Culture in the West and in China</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarly Inquiry on Televised Singing Contests</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarly Inquiry on Chinese Popular Music</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework and Methodology</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Voice in Discourse</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Chapters</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER II. UNCHANGED THEMES: THE BLIND AUDITION, THE VOTING SYSTEM, AND THE MUSIC**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Voice of China and Sing! China: An Overview and Some Highlights</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Blind Audition: An Illusion of Fairness</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Voting System: The Controlled Democracy</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybridized Music: The Everlasting Public Enjoyment</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER III. PATRIOTIC SONGS, NATIONALIST RHETORIC, AND ETHNIC PERFORMANCES: THE REPRESENTATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND NATIONALISM  ............................................................................................................ 68

The Discourse of Nationalism in Chinese Musical Scenes ........................................ 70

Patriotic Messages in “I Love You, China” .............................................................. 77

The Reiteration of Two Nationalist Rhetorical Themes ............................................ 85

Minority Ethnic Groups on National Stages .............................................................. 93

Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 102

CHAPTER IV. FICTIVE KINSHIP, MUSIC PLAYING, AND ANDROGYNY: THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER AND GENDER ROLES ................................................................. 106

The Genealogy of Gender and Gender Roles in the Chinese Music Scene ............... 108

Performing Gender Roles via Fictive Kinship .......................................................... 116

Gender Roles in Popular Music Making and Performing .......................................... 123

Performing Androgyny: Transgressed Bodies and Voices ........................................ 131

Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 139

CHAPTER V. MUSIC TASTES, PROFESSIONAL AMATEURISM, AND SOCIAL DIVIDE: THE FORMATION OF VOCAL DIVERSITY .................................................................... 143

The Association of Music with Class Stratification in Chinese History ................... 145

Cultural Capital, Music Tastes and the New Class Culture ...................................... 151

Time, Money, and Quality: The Social Divide of Professional and Amateur Musicians ......................................................................................................................... 159

The Overseas, Urbanites, Migrants and Ruralites: Voices from Everywhere .......... 165

Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 172
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION: POPULAR CULTURE, SINGING COMPETITION, AND THE VOICE

On July 15, 2016, the singing competition show, formerly known as *The Voice of China*, aired as anticipated after a months-long lawsuit on rights to the brand name between the local partner Star China Media (SCM) and Talpa Global, the Dutch producer of *The Voice* franchise. But this time, the show had a different name, *Sing! China*. Audiences who had watched any episode of the first four seasons of *The Voice of China* could easily identify that the so-called new show still followed the old format: the same judging panel, the same competition process—blind audition, battle round, and live performance, and the same voting system. The major differences included a change of host, the redesigning of the stage setting, and a new logo. Due to the copyright controversy, the new show had to abandon its signature chair-turning trick in the blind auditions during which the judges turn their seats to face the contestants who they select to work with. In the new season, the judges sat on chariot-like chairs that slid down 15-foot high tracks and rushed towards the contestants. In its new incarnation, as described by Foong (2016), the show became “looser and funnier.” Judges/coaches teased about the new moving chairs and purposefully and repetitively advertised the new name of the show. It is obvious that the new version of *The Voice of China* tended to create a more entertaining and relaxing environment on the screen despite the fact the show was still under political and industry supervision and involved in a legal dispute.

As interesting as the change of the stage setting was the change of the logo. The old logo
with a hand showing a “V” gesture while holding a real microphone diagonally was redesigned as a hand holding a cartoonish torch vertically. On the top of the torch is not a flame but a big shining star representing the anticipated winner of the competition. Surrounding it are four smaller stars representing four judges/coaches. Next to the image are both the Chinese and English names of the new show. However, the title is not identical in both languages. The Chinese version of the new show is translated as “The New Voice of China” while the official English name is “Sing! China.” More interestingly, the Chinese version of the old show *The Voice of China* is literally translated as “The Good Voice of China.” The names aside, it seems that the singing competition show, old or new, is looking for a voice that can stand out among ordinary people and can represent the whole nation.

In the following sections of this chapter, I start with an introductory statement that includes the research questions and the rationale for this project. Next, I provide a literature review revolving around the study of popular culture in the West and in China, the scholarly inquiries on several locally and globally produced televised singing contests, and the historical and social analysis of Chinese music in academia. I then examine the theoretical frameworks on vocality that support this inquiry, as well as the critical methods. I conclude this chapter with an overview of this project’s remaining chapters.

**Research Questions**

Aligned with the show’s intention to look for *the* voice, this project engages scholarly conversations about identity construction and negotiation in Chinese society through the
examination of a contemporary popular cultural product—a televised singing competition. I specifically explore the four seasons of The Voice of China and the first two seasons of the rebranded Sing! China. Following Stuart Hall’s (2009) claim that popular culture is an arena of both consent and resistance, and a site where hegemony is both challenged and secured, this project seeks to answer two overarching questions: 1) What role does popular culture, in the form of a televised singing competition show, play in Chinese people’s everyday life in the new millennium? 2) How is The Voice of China a site where Chinese people articulate, interrogate and negotiate aspects of identity?

Under these two guiding questions, this project raises and answers more specific questions in the process of analysis. As a music competition show, The Voice of China ostensibly seeks to discover a voice that may have a distinctive vocal timbre and can articulate musical language with professional skills. As a reality television show, among many other talent shows in recent years, it is also looking for a unique personality with stories that can impress, move and resonate with people. But what exactly is the voice that the show is looking for? What are the qualities embedded in the voice and what are the criteria for choosing that voice? Who is eligible to make the voice and who are empowered to vote for the voice? What narratives do the voice tell and how are they similar or different from contestant to contestant and from culture to culture?

It is important to observe that The Voice of China came to popularity around the same time when the Chinese Dream began to be promoted as the signature ideology of the new leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP thereafter). Mahoney (2013) interprets the “Chinese
Dream” as a discourse-framing metanarrative that is “historically and politically situated and contextualized within a number of other ongoing narratives and policies in China” (p. 15). In an official sense, the Chinese Dream is understood as a project of pursuing rejuvenation of the Chinese nation from the national humiliations beginning with the First Opium War (1839–1842) through the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1945 (China Network Television, 2012; Wang, 2013). Although the rhetoric of the Chinese Dream is considered as another form of the patriotic education campaign, the government endeavors to convince the public that the national dream is also for the individual Chinese citizen. Thus, the whole society attempts to eulogize the dream narrative in order to be politically correct. The entertainment industry is no exception. Therefore, it is interesting to examine how the Chinese Dream is narrated and represented in a popular cultural product where media, popular music, and political ideology further complicate and implicate various issues in identity formation and power struggles. Some specific questions include: How do various voices presented in the show narrate different personal, communal, and national stories that correspond to the grand narrative of the Chinese Dream? How does the marketing strategy of recruiting contestants from the Chinese diaspora fit into the Chinese Dream narrative? How do the audiences of different identity groups and at different locations respond to the Chinese Dream narrative? What musical messages do the performance convey about the Chinese Dream narrative? If the grand dream narrative is to reconcile personal identity and national identity, how do people understand their social identities such as gender and class? How do different aspects of identity intersect, contradict, and negotiate each other? It is my hope
that answering these specific questions will allow me to better understand the complex relationship among politics and popular culture, the government and the masses, the powerful agent and the disempowered.

**Rationale**

The rationale for this project comes from both internal and external forces. Inside China, there is an urgent need to study popular culture because of its important and ubiquitous role in people’s everyday life. On the one hand, the whole society is saturated with popular cultural products and people are constantly, and sometimes overwhelmingly, consuming them. On the other hand, people are sadly unaware of the power of those products, facing the risks of becoming “cultural dupes” and being taken advantage of by the powerful (Hall, 2009). As a cultural studies scholar, I wish to follow Hall’s step to expose the power relations existing in contemporary Chinese society and to raise scholarly awareness of this issue by exploring how the marginalized and the subordinated “might secure or win, however temporarily, cultural space from the dominant group” (Procter, 2004, p. 2). Almost twenty years later, Liu’s (2000) observation that “few, except perhaps a small number of literary historians, are interested in the culture of the masses” (p. 130) may have changed in Chinese academia, but the need to study popular culture is still necessary and urgent.

Following the trend of the rapidly changing mediascape (Appadurai, 1990) and facing both the pressure and drive of neo-liberalization, China’s transition from a socialist egalitarian society to a socioeconomically diversified country has had great impact on its cultural industry. An
increase in transnational information reception and import of cultural products has lead to, as I observe, the loosening grip of the authoritative governments’ control over media that creates an opportunity for individuals to construct, articulate, and interrogate their own social and political stances and identities. As a particular popular cultural product, reality TV has boomed over the last fifteen years in the Chinese market due to its innovative feature of merging marketing and “real life” entertainment, converging new technologies with programs, and acknowledging the coexistence of the manufactured artifice and truth claims (Murray & Ouellette, 2009). Such a fresh television genre brings much surprise and excitement to the ordinary viewers. Chinese people had been living in a politically repressed and culturally monotonous environment for too long and apparently sought an opportunity to redefine who they are and re-evaluate what they are living for. Thus in this project, I use a singing competition as a specific site to interpret to what extent Chinese people are able to express their voices not only in the singing contest but also in a larger society and how they negotiate different aspects of identity in the face of ever-present government intervention.

The reasons that I have chosen The Voice of China as the research site are multilayered. As indicated by Denzin (1989), our “own worlds of experience are the proper subject matter of inquiry” (p. 25). In a similar vein, Smith (1987) suggests that researchers begin academic inquiry with their “bodily existence and activity” (p. 15). From a personal perspective, as a frequent viewer of the show, I enjoyed watching it for relaxation and entertainment after long work hours. As a musical fan, I was able to watch the singing competition that stands for a high standard in
the Chinese-speaking world and had the opportunity to listen to the most current trends of popular music in China. I was surprised to notice that the contestants were capable of singing a variety of local and international musical genres and presented remarkable performing skills. In the process of research, I position myself as a critical-cultural scholar who attempts to reveal and interrogate how the show serves as the site of power struggles and identity negotiation. Critical scholar Dana Cloud (1994) reminds us, “the critic is implicated in the structures of power under investigation and must be reflexive about his or her own interests in pursuing a particular critical goal” (p. 153). Thus, I am fully aware of my positionality as a person and as a critic in this project that involves identity markers such as ethnicity, nationality, class, and gender. These identity markers are also relational, evolving, and intertwined with time and space.

My personal preference to singing competition shows was shaped by my parents’ habit of watching this type of television program in the early 1990s. As a female Chinese international student residing in the U.S., I spent long hours watching television programs including various singing competition shows as remedies for my stress, loneliness, and sadness. Given that the broadcasting time of The Voice of China and now Sing! China spans from early summer to fall during which I usually travel back and forth between Asia and the U.S., I have watched the show with different people, at different times and locations, and from different media outlets. I am a registered member of the official website of the show, which allows me to watch and re-watch any episode at any time and at any place. These personal reasons drove me to devote much time and energy to the show, which in turn inspired me to conduct scholarly inquiry into it.
Aside from personal preference, the show itself is outstanding and unique among many others. Its innovative and distinctive selection process featuring blind audition, which attempts to avoid potentially biased aesthetic judgment, secures its winning position in the Chinese television industry with the highest ratings. According to Keane (2015), the year 2013 was the peak year for talent shows—twenty-one music and dance formats were imported by Chinese provincial satellite channels from the Netherlands, Britain, U.S., South Korea, and Spain. Among those, *The Voice of China* stood out. The finale of Season 2, airing October 7, 2013, received a rating of 6.1, the highest among current Chinese variety shows (p. 89). Such success was confirmed by Burkit (2013) in her article “Why ‘The Voice’ is China’s No. 1 TV Show.” According to Burkit, *The Voice of China*, unlike other talent shows in China, has adhered more closely to the original Dutch format and its unbiased selection process allows more ordinary people to showcase their voice/stories to the public. This show, with its distinctive format, constructs itself as a dreamland that presents a fair opportunity for ordinary people to become extraordinary.

Therefore, it is my hope that a critical analysis of the show can contribute to critical-cultural studies by investigating how the global musical reality television format as a contemporary popular cultural product influences everyday life, and by identifying the implications for contemporary economic, political, social and cultural structures in a transnational setting. It is also my humble ambition to illustrate to readers that what is happening in contemporary Chinese society matters to the globalized world.
Literature Review

*The Voice of China* is both a musical reality television franchise in a narrow sense and a popular culture product in a broad sense. Therefore, it is necessary to review the major writings revolving around the critical analysis on popular culture and reality television, with particular emphasis on its distinctions and configurations in the Chinese context. In addition, the purpose of this study, as mentioned previously, is to examine how Chinese people articulate, interrogate and negotiate their personal, collective, and national identities through the use of popular music and media both in and out of the show. Thus to read and synthesize how other scholars explore and intervene in similar topics in specific geopolitical terrains and at different historical junctures is definitely inspirational and instructive.

**Popular Culture in the West and in China**

The rise and significance of popular culture has long been discussed and debated in Western scholarship. John Storey (2001) complicates the understanding of popular culture by giving six definitions of the concept. His intention was to sketch out how “various critical approaches have attempted to fix the meaning of popular culture” (p. 5). The six definitions include a quantitative dimension of culture, the differentiation of high and low culture, the mass consumer culture described by the Frankfurt school, an authentic culture of the people, a neo-Gramscian perspective “to see it as a terrain of ideological struggle between dominate and subordinate classes” (p. 11), and a postmodern culture with no distinction between high and low culture.

With different understandings, cultural critics explore various cultural products in different ways.
As the iconic figure of the Frankfurt school, Adorno (1941) compares popular music with serious music and critiques the former as the standardized products of the cultural industry that foster passivity among listeners. Such a pessimistic perspective towards popular culture “denies the effectivity of popular cultural politics” (Barker, 2008, p. 50) and subsequently has been challenged and revised by other cultural critics.

As one of the leading figures of Birmingham School, Stuart Hall’s (2009) way to study popular culture is to expose the power relations existing within certain societies at any given moment. Besides a theoretical approach, Hall also dives into various discussions on specific cultural products. Hall argues that television, as any other popular cultural products, becomes the site where audiences, regardless of cultural background, economic standing, and personal experiences, play an active role in decoding messages and creating meanings. Music is another frequently explored cultural form in Hall’s academic inquiry. Significantly apart from Adorno who despises jazz and popular music, Hall and Whannel (1964) understand the important role popular arts have played in everyday life. They see popular musical products such as blues and jazz as powerful weapons that potentially resist hegemonic conventions of a certain society.

Following the six definitions, Storey (2001) further points out that the similarity among them lies in their dependence on a capitalist market economy in which industrialization and urbanization are prerequisites. Storey claims that Britain was the first country to produce popular culture in this particular periodization because “industrialization and urbanization changed fundamentally the cultural relations within the landscape of popular culture” (p. 14). With
Chinese popular culture, the particular periodization is the 1980s, a post-Mao era featuring the initiation of the socialist market economy, “the emergence of postmodern discourse, the commercialization and transformation of popular culture, and the changing role of the intellectual” (Lu, 2001, p. 11). In *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China*, Jing Wang (1996) describes the 1980s “as a period of utopian vision on the one hand, and an era of emergent crises on the other” (p. 1). Wang’s definition clearly pinpoints the significance of this particular periodization in which the utopian vision of enlightenment advocated by the Chinese intellectuals and elites was about to give way to a boom of mass culture and everyday life. Although it is Wang’s contention to present in her book the intellectual and elites’ efforts to negotiate with the Party and to engage in the debates over cultural politics, the discursive view of high culture fever around the Chinese aesthetic and ideological contestation discussed in the book is exactly one major factor that expedited the growth and spread of popular culture in the Chinese context.

The *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* (2005) offers a brief genealogy of Chinese popular culture, including its emergency in the late 1970s, its development from 1979 through the mid-1980s by Hong Kong and Taiwanese film and music, its differentiation from the elite culture of 1980s, and its association with the commercialized mass culture in the 1990s. The transformation of popular culture in the Chinese context, as described in the entry, “has blurred the boundaries between the ‘high’ and the ‘low’, between the elite and the masses, between official (state) and non-official (society), and between cultural and commodity production” (p.
Such a description corresponds to Storey’s (2001) sixth definition of popular culture wherein the postmodern era, there is no longer the distinction between high and popular culture. In a theoretical inquiry, Wang (2001) also confirms the deconstructive shift, saying:

[w]hile a methodological middle ground promising the simultaneous articulation of the productionist and consumptionist approaches to popular culture has yet to be broken, … the old binary paradigm of the high and the low—constructs premised on the absolute divide between the people and intellectuals—has long since tumbled down. (p. 2)

In her later analysis, Wang focuses on popular cultural products such as the movie box office, the publishing industry, and the avant-garde theater, and claims that since China has entered a new era of market economy featuring the circuit of commodity production with increasingly fluid boundaries between high and low, the terms of opposition between the two can no longer hold. The binary between official and unofficial is also problematic in the Chinese context according to Wang because it fails to consider the state-society relations and the policy-culture relations in Chinese society. Therefore, neither high/low nor official/unofficial dyads are sufficient to describe the whole picture.

Perceiving popular culture’s entanglement with the political side of globalization and postmodernism, Kang Liu (2000) first re-examines the practical and theoretical legacy of the culture of the masses. By referring to the mass culture theory of the Frankfurt School and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, Liu argues that rather than just following the global postmodern imaginary, popular culture in China has its native form and local needs due to its complicated historical root in the revolutionary consciousness and socialist infrastructure. Liu sees the importance of everyday discourse in Chinese popular culture that “has increasingly become the
site of dialogical contention of a variety of forces” among which the culture industry and traditional legacy “intersect and interpenetrate” (p. 141). In a similar vein, Sheldon H. Lu (2001) also situates the discussion of popular culture in the intertwining relationship of postmodernism and globalization. He declares that the aim to do so is to join in the scholarly conversation on global postmodernity and to “study how post-1989 China has become a chief generator of such transnational postmodernity and has thus revised the Western model” (p. 4). Unlike the previous scholars, though, Lu puts specific cultural products such as cinema, television, and arts at the center of his investigation. Lu is one of a few scholars who attempt to analyze how popular music becomes a vehicle for ordinary people to express their complex sentiments and how television dramas are a site for national identity construction and gender representation.

**Scholarly Inquiry on Televised Singing Contests**

Televised singing competition has always been present in modern Chinese media. The earliest program dates back to China Central Television’s (CCTV thereafter) biennial *National Young Singers Televised Contest* (*Quanguo Qingnian Geshou Dianshi Dajiangersai*) in 1984 when a television set was a luxury good for ordinary Chinese households. Positioning itself as representing the highest level of professional singing in China, this contest features mostly revolutionary songs, folk classics, and operas, and overly emphasizes expert judgment and professional skills, which sets up a formidable barrier for ordinary contestants and generates minimal audience engagement (Yang, 2014, p. 520). The performance of contestants is best described as monotonous and stiff; the judges stern-faced and white-haired. Thus the show does
“not fit well with the taste of the younger generation” (Yang, 2014, p. 520). What the younger generation needs is a more interactive television format that enables audiences to easily access and music with more diversified genres and down-to-earth lyrics. But on the bright side, as observed by Jones (1992), these state-sponsored programs “signaled the increasingly dominant role played by television in promoting and disseminating popular singers and songs” (p. 17).

Even though this singing contest—perceived as elite, and sometimes as elitist—has produced many nationally recognized singing masters, its success has gradually waned in the new millennia as more international television formats have been introduced to Chinese audiences. In discussing how formatting has transformed China’s television industry, Keane (2015) documents the formats of television shows in China from 1990-2014, among which talent shows have been the most widely accepted (p. 89). *Super Girl* (2004-2006), a clone of *Idol*, produced by Hunan Satellite TV, gained unexpected and unprecedented popularity and became an overwhelming media, social, and cultural event, for example. It was the first television show that ignited the most heated scholarly conversations, probably due to its positionality as a substitute onto which Chinese intellectuals could project their fantasy of democracy (Meng, 2009). Most of the discussions focus on how the show engendered tremendous political implications by provocatively and revolutionarily inviting the audiences to vote (Wu, 2011; Yang, 2014), how the media helped audiences create a civic space, and how the show represented the negotiation of globalization and localization. For example, Yang (2014) discusses the use of a paid voting system and fans’ discursive and affective engagement with the show. Huang (2014)
demonstrates the acts of resistance that Chinese youths have applied in this event to negotiate between the consumerist media industry and the dominant ideology. De Kloet and Landsberger (2012) argue that the show partially represents the rapidly changing mediascape of China, an intersection in which global and local capital, global and local media industries, and the nation-state are intimately working together. These scholarly discussions triggered by Super Girl are pivotal because they symbolize a growing academic awareness of reality television and audience analysis in the Chinese context.

In a broad sense, Latham (2007) comprehensively portrays a contemporary popular cultural landscape in China that consists of a variety of cultural products and everyday life. Latham identifies four phases in the diversification and transformation of entertainment programming. The first was the variety show in the 1980s such as CCTV Spring Festival Gala\(^1\) and the above-mentioned CCTV’s biennial National Young Singers Televised Contest. The second phase features game shows of the 1990s, which was followed by the quiz and knowledge contests in the 2000s as the third phase. China is currently within the fourth phase, characterized by an explosion of reality television programs in which the female singing talent show Super Girl drew massive national audiences and media attention.

As the original format from which Super Girl illegally copied, the Idol franchise ignited

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\(^1\) Spring Festival Gala is a Chinese New Year special produced by CCTV, and is shown on the eve of Chinese New Year. It is a variety show, often featuring musical, dance, comedy, and drama performances. It has become a ritual for many Chinese families, including overseas Chinese, to tune in to the show on Chinese New Year’s Eve. According to Latham’s (2007) description, the show invites “full array of pop stars, celebrated army singers, comedians, film and television actors, and presenters and various other performing artists such as dancers, acrobats, lion dancers, and traditional musicians, and has become a national feature of New Year’s celebrations” (p. 67).
even greater scholarly conversations in the West, centering on the show’s authenticity, politics of identity, audience reception, and performance. Koos Zwaan and Joost de Bruin (2012) collect fifteen articles to address the above-mentioned themes represented in the Idol format. By comparing socio-cultural explanations and media-systemic explanations in Danish Idols and Australian Idols, Jensen (2012) observes that both Idols share a similar dramaturgy and narrative due to a strictly controlled format and that Danish Idols has a mid-range production value and targets young audience whereas Australian Idols has a higher production value and is skewed towards a broader audience. In a more detailed way, Katherine Meizel (2011) devotes an entire book to explain why a singing competition show matters to Americans. She compares the participatory viewer-voting system to electoral politics and demonstrates how contestants construct and negotiate their personal identity with national identities and how audiences respond. In an examination of Vietnam Idol, Bui (2012) particularly discusses how the show tends to cultivate a consumer-oriented youth generation by implanting Western individualism and opportunism, but fails to achieve it due to social inequality, inaccessibility to technology and media, and cultural nationalism. He specifically elaborates on the female winner whose accomplishment indicates both the triumph of female bodies and a sign of women’s objectification in the Vietnamese society. These scholarly discussions are foundational and suggestive to my project because of their inquiries into and intervention in media, popular culture, and power dynamics.

_Scholarly Inquiry on Chinese Popular Music_
Since this dissertation focuses on a musical talent show, scholarly inquiries on Chinese popular music are highly relevant. Andrew Jones (1992) records the early development of popular music in China. In the late 1920s, Shanghai was the center “for the development of a commodified, syncretic popular music disseminated through the mass media” (p. 10). With the CCP ascending to power in 1949, however, popular music in China has been denigrated as “yellow” or “pornographic” both for its association with the sexual pleasures of the burgeoning urban underworld nightclubs and its capability to lure people away from the pressing mission of nation-building and anti-imperialist resistance (Jones, 1992; 2001). Under the leadership of the CCP, the post-1949 Chinese music theme “was unabashedly charged with the task of propagating Maoist ideals of class struggle, revolutionary fervor, and self-abnegation” (Jones, 1992, p. 13).

Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power with his “open and reform policy” in the late 1970s marks the renaissance of Chinese popular music. Nimrod Baranovitch (2003) divides the development of popular music in the reform era into three stages. The first stage from the early 1980s to the mid-1980s sees the first flow of foreign popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The second stage from the mid-1980s to the late 1980s sees the rise of two fads in Chinese popular music: xibeifeng (Northwest Wind), “a style that fused the folk music of northwestern China with disco and rock rhythms” (Jones, 1992, p. 17), and qiuge (Prison Songs), a musical style to lament “the youthful convicts and the rusticated urban youth of the Cultural Revolution” (Jones, 1992, p. 17). The third stage began in the early 1990s with the rise of Chinese rock. Baranovitch’s discussion of popular music starts with the rise of popular culture in the Chinese society, and such
periodization gives a better sense of how popular music was employed rhetorically by ordinary people to express their discontent with the reality, nostalgia for the past, and yearning for a new future.

Storey (1996) argues that popular music can be political in many different ways. He borrows John Street’s (1986) words that “[t]he politics of music are a mixture of state policies, business practices, artistic choices and audience responses,” and concludes that “[e]ach of these elements places restrictions on and offers possibilities for the politics of pop music” (p. 112). Popular music in the Chinese context has been as powerful as in the Western world since its emergence. The development of popular music in China from the 1920s to the 1990s witnesses the radical social changes of a nation transformed from a semi-colonized entity to an independent one ruled by a highly centralized party, experiences the changing sonic technologies that correspond to the establishment of the national political and economic system, and reflects the shifting musical taste of the masses longing for authenticity, change and freedom. The brief account of such history necessarily lays the sociohistorical groundwork for contemporary popular music in a new political, economic, and social context. To examine contemporary popular music through a singing reality TV show is to evaluate how musical messages are conveyed by singers in a specific setting, how music is accepted by the audiences in a broader sense, and more importantly, how contemporary popular music helps construct personal, collective, and national identity in the new millennia.

There are also other works examining Chinese popular music with focuses on different

These more recent works on Chinese popular music together construct an account of how popular music emerged from “the intersecting forces of globalization, nationalism, and indigenization and the complex political-economic imperatives” (Xiao, 2010). These elaborations also influence this project both theoretically and methodologically.

**Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

The official website of *The Voice* (Season 12, 2017), states,

We are searching for solo artists and duos that perform all types of music: pop, rock, R&B, hip-hop, alternative, Latin, country, blues, [and] indie. We will be hitting the road, traveling across the country this winter and looking for the strongest vocalists to compete in the blockbuster vocal competition show! We want to know your story and why you are *The Voice*.²

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² *The Voice* refers to *The Voice of U.S.* See http://www.nbethevoice.com/index
This blurb briefly describes three qualifications for *The Voice*—capacity to sing many types of musical genres, the strongest vocal ability, and a unique personal story. It is sure that *The Voice of China* or any other franchise may have slightly different criteria for selection due to language differences and culture preferences, but the show, no matter where it hosts, is looking for a unique voice that can both speak for the singing artist and for the whole nation. But what exactly is this voice?

**The Voice in Discourse**

Schlichter and Eidsheim (2014) synthesize the voice in academic discourse and divide it into two camps: the material and the symbolic. The material inquiry into the voice is mainly from a scientific perspective, such as the diagnostic and therapeutic examination in medicine, the physiological understanding of its function within the body, and the vibration and airflow in engineering. Symbolic inquiry mostly occurs in the philosophical and theoretical field, emphasizing the particular figuration of the voice and seeing it as a carrier of meanings in Western culture, in relationship to its materiality.

Following the symbolic inquiry, Cavarero’s (2005) discussion of voice is situated in the separation of voice and meaning, the phonic and semantic. Unsatisfied with the contemporary studies that analyze the voice or the vocal sphere from an interpretive perspective, Cavarero aims to “rescue the voice from figuration” (p. xxii) and proposes to study “the fleshy nature of the voice” (p. xxii). In her demonstration, Western philosophy always prioritizes the semantic content of a speech over the vocal utterance due to the fact that as soon as the utterance is
produced, the materiality of voice vanishes and is no longer paid much attention. But it is the voice that “precedes, generates, and exceeds verbal communication” (Cavarero, p. 29-30). From a sociolinguist perspective, voice is very powerful in the meaning making process because different accents and intonations may engender completely different effects and voice with a distinctive quality can create a unique personality (Dong, 2017, p. 5). The way Cavarero explores “the fleshy nature of the voice” (p. xxii) is meaningful to this project because just as she is looking for the uniqueness of the voice for its own sake, the show is searching for the voice that can represent a whole nation. Every human being should have a unique voice that distinguishes himself/herself from other people, just like every singer in the show tells a different story. Dong (2017) agrees that voice has “a fingerprint-like feature that can be used to identify and recognize a person” (p. 5) and such a unique quality may be produced by individual socialization and other political, economic, and cultural influences.

Different from Cavarero’s (2005) searching for the unique voice, Dolar (2006) describes the voice as a paradoxical small object that can be understood as “an object of aesthetic pleasure, an object of veneration and worship” (p. 4) on the one hand, and on the other hand, the medium of signification and the carrier of meanings that ignores its physicality. Examining only one aspect of the voice, according to Dolar, can obscure and obfuscate the object voice. So any attempts to analyze a voice should include these two aspects of it: what Dolar describes as the aestheticization of voice and the signification of voice. The Voice of China and the rebranded Sing! China are an ideal site to explore these two aspects because it is a singing show that
provides audiences with a venue to listen to, appreciate, and fetishize a myriad of voices in terms of “the particular individual timbre, resonance, pitch, cadence, melody, the peculiar way of pronouncing certain sounds” (Dolar, 2006, p. 22) with the accompaniment of musical instruments.

Important to the understanding of the discourse of voice is Roland Barthes’s (1977) concept of “the grain of the voice.” Drawing from Julia Kristeva’s (1986) terms “pheno-text” and “geno-text” (where the former refers to a surface text serving to communicate, while the latter lies below the surface describing a process that tends to articulate ephemeral and non-signifying structures), Barthes situates the voice in the scenario of classical repertoire and develops the idea of “pheno-song” and “geno-song.” For him,

The *pheno-song*… covers all the phenomena, all the features which belong to the structure of being sung, the rules of the genre, the coded form of the melisma, the composer’s the style of the interpretation: in short, everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression, everything which …forms the tissue of cultural values. (p. 182)

The geno-song, by contrast, “is the volume of the singing and speaking voice… (that) forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression…” and it is “the diction of language” (p. 183). Barthes further clarifies that the “grain” of the voice goes beyond its timbre and the significance it produces can be better understood by the friction between music and the particular language.

This project draws upon a range of sources on vocal narrative in an attempt to understand voice on two levels. First, I explore “how meaning is infused into the sound of music and how
these meanings are performed by both performers, music management and audiences”

(Eidsheim, 2008, p. 21) in the context of *The Voice of China*. Simply put, this project studies the literal meaning of the voice, including its “fleshy nature” and aesthetic features on the first level. On the second level, the figurative meaning of the voice is the focal point, because the voice in the show is not only associated with musical ability, it also tells different personal and collective stories that together construct the grand narrative of Chinese identity.

In his study of literary works, Bakhtin (1981) introduces the theory of “heteroglossia,” describing the phenomenon that within a single discourse coexist multiple voices that include “social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions” (p. 261-262). The voice, according to Bakhtin, is “the speaking personality, the speaking consciousness…[that] has a will or desire behind it, its own timbre and overtones” (p. 434). At the macroscopic level, the diversity of voice reflects a heterogeneous, complicated, and multilayered society; at the microscopic level, it indicates the multiplicity of personal identities that are formed and shaped by a wide range of social, cultural, historical, and physiological factors, as individuals are “constantly exposed to, socialized in, and embedded in different competing, and possibly conflicting, discourses” (Dong, 2017, p. 6). In a similar way, Bakhtin also develops the concept of “polyphony” to describe multiple voices in other literary classics. In Park-Fuller’s (1986) understanding, “[p]olyphony refers not literally to a number of voices, but to the collective quality of an individual utterance” (p. 2). That is to say, in a specific
discourse, there are a myriad of independent voices with its own perspective and agency. The interaction of different voices, Park-Fuller further points out, “creates a dialogic relationship” (p. 2) that can produce even more powerful and more dynamic pictures in that discourse. Although it is Bakhtin’s contention to emphasize the agency of individual voice, I believe that the whole picture constituted by these voices is equally important. In this project, I explore both individual voice at the microscopic level and an imaginary voice that represent the whole nation at the macroscopic level.

In a critical autoethnographic study of self-identity, following Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of “heteroglossia” and “polyphony,” Choi (2013) employs multivocality to describe “the simultaneity of multiple meanings, intentions, personalities and consciousness and the traces of a speaker’s past, the present context and future desires that are embedded within utterances” (p. 9). Being able to speak different languages and having the opportunity to live in different cultures, Choi defines herself as a multilingual individual that internalizes the multivocal identity. In a similar way, Szeto’s (2011) proposes the concept of “cosmopolitical consciousness” that “engages transnationally in potentially contradictory discoursed and complicated histories of gender, ethnicity, and class” (p. 8) in her examination of three Asian martial arts film artists. There are two major differences between Choi’s multivocality and Szeto’s cosmopolitical consciousness: first, the former refers to the individual level while the latter refers to a collective level; and, the former emerges from linguistic and cultural perspectives while the latter emerged from various discourses in cultural politics. But both concepts shed lights on the analysis of the
relationship between individual identity and collective identity.

The notion of *multivocality* nicely fits into my discussion of the figurative meaning of the voice in the show. I argue that the singing competition show *The Voice of China* is not only seeking the talented musical voices but also searches for the particular kind of voice that is shaped by particular histories, practices, desires and so on (Choi, 2013, p. 88). The various voices presented in the show together constitute Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony that refers to the entanglement of multiple independent voices. These voices tell different personal, communal and national stories that correspond to the narrative of Chinese identity to which the notion of the Chinese Dream becomes increasingly important.

**Methodology**

To achieve the outcome of this project, I employ a mixed methodology. First, it is necessary to explain briefly how socio-economic determinants and political ideology have had impacts on the development of popular culture, popular music in particular, and identity construction in China. Therefore, applying sociological and critical-cultural methods to my examination of relevant cultural and socio-historical contexts helps identify and clarify the complex relationship among these factors. In his study of popular music, Frith (1987) proposes to approach it in a sociological, rather than a musicological way. He claims that in analyzing popular music we have to consider “the values scoffed at in the talk of social functions” (p. 133). In a similar way, DeNora (2000) suggests that music is “a powerful medium of social order” (p. 163). Obviously, both Frith and DeNora see the importance of situating popular music in its relevant social-
historical and cultural background that provides the foundation for the emergence and
development of popular music and popular culture at large.

Second, this study employs textual analysis to interpret every episode of every season of
*The Voice of China.* Textual analysis describes the content, structure, and functions of the
messages contained in specific texts (Frey et al, 2000). In this case, the footage of the show
provides the specific texts from which I examine closely the narratives, dialogues, and settings in
order to understand the deeper messages behind the show. To conduct the textual analysis, I
reviewed complete scenes from every episode of the show, paying special attention to the
performance of the contestants, the musical languages and articulations, on-camera interviews,4
as well as the dialogue and interaction between the contestants and the judges/coaches.

Interaction analysis becomes an important part of the textual analysis because scholars believe
that interaction “requires much knowledge on the part of individual communicators and the
ability to coordinate behaviors with others” (Frey, et al, 2000, p. 243). The study of interaction
focuses on the messages exchanged during mutual or group interactions so as to extract the
systematic, orderly and meaningful properties from the communicators. (Heritage, 1989; Frey et
al, 2000). This study analyzes both verbal and non-verbal interactions among judges/coaches,
and between contestants and judges/coaches to convey those messages and to identify the show’s
visible and invisible power dynamics.

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3 This project includes analysis of *Sing! China* Season 1 and 2 because the show did not change formats despite the legal issues it faced.
4 *Sing! China* Season 1 adds a personal video diary room session in which contestants have a broadcast monologue about their feelings before they go to their blind audition.
The first season of *The Voice of China* was originally broadcast every Friday during primetime from July 13 to September 30, 2012 on Zhejiang Satellite Television. Seasons 2 through 4 were aired from mid-July to early October in the following years. The first and the second seasons of the rebranded *Sing! China* were broadcast during the same time frame in 2016 and 2017. Every episode is also available on the online platform Tencent QQLive and can be accessed at any time. I watched every episode several times while taking detailed notes in order to perceive new insights that are conducive to the central theme of this project. With notes at hand, I read and reread them closely, “reviewing, reexperiencing, and reexamining everything that has been written down, while self-consciously seeking to identify themes, patterns, and variations within this record” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 173-174). Repeated readings allow me to identify the recurring themes in the notes including “compelling incidents, sequences of action repetitive acts, and other critical details that inform [my] understanding of the scene” (Lindlof, 1995, p. 219-220).

Watching television, along with reading Internet literature, is conducive to the analysis of a television show like this, whose existence and popularity depends extensively on strategies of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006; Cooley et al, 2008). So my third approach, following what Meizel (2008) has done with *American Idol*, is to do a critical analysis of the online discourse relevant to the show. I examine fan-engaged online community, corporate and government websites, media reports and online articles, and personal social networks and blogs to obtain any knowledge that is useful for this research. I originally planned to observe and participate in a
viewer-oriented commenting system *danmu* to see how viewers exchange “their reactions to, attitudes, opinions, and judgments on what they see and hear, and on what others are also posting, immediately before, during, and immediately after a program’s airing” (Ji & Raney, 2015, p. 224). The commenting system allows registered media viewers to have an immediate and synchronous interaction with each other by typing their comments whenever and wherever they are watching a show. By engaging myself in this watching community, I wanted to reaffirm the active role the researcher plays as a “participant-experiencer” in the field (Walstrom, 2004). Unfortunately, due to the state’s regulation on censorship, the commenting system was called off for *The Voice of China* and I had to look for alternative ways to hear voices of the audiences of the show. For example, I have exhaustively searched Internet sources both in Chinese and English to look for relevant media reports, personal blogs, and online forums. I have also extensively examined the messages left by viewers under a limited number of video clips of the show that are available on YouTube and other media platforms.

**Overview of Chapters**

Following this introductory chapter, Chapters Two through Five begin to answer the two overarching research questions about the role of popular culture in Chinese people’s everyday life and various issues in identity articulation and negotiation from different perspectives.

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5 The new commenting system (*danmu* in Japanese, and 弹幕 in Chinese character, meaning “bullet screen”) first appeared on a Japanese video sharing website and was introduced to China in 2008. Registered members, while watching any programs on this website, can communicate via short texts inserted on the top of the screen by typing their immediate comments at the bottom of the video player. Entries scroll into the frame of the streaming images from right to left, and normally stay visible for 3 to 4 seconds until they disappear out of the left side of the screen. Some programs could be covered as many as thousands of lines of texts creating a visual image of bullets moving.
Chapter Two provides both the background description of the show and background knowledge of the larger context of Chinese society in which political ideology and social norms are powerful in affecting the everyday life of Chinese people. I first offer an overview of the show, with some highlighted performances and personalities, as well as media criticism and audience analysis. Then I move to closely examine three important pillars of the show—blind audition, voting system, and music. In particular, I trace the origin and application of the blind audition in musical performances and elaborate on how this unique setting in the show functions as a site where ordinary Chinese viewers engage with an illusion of fairness. Then I explore how the voting mechanism is used in Chinese popular media, how it symbolizes the fantasy of democracy for the ordinary Chinese citizens, and how it reflects the power negotiation between the public and the state. I also discuss how the hybridized popular music in the show reflects the accumulative changes in Chinese political, cultural and social landscape and serves as the cultural site where different aspects of identities are articulated and negotiated.

In Chapter Three, I examine how the show, under the name of either *The Voice of China* or *Sing! China*, attempts to reinforce the ruling Party’s appropriations of cultural nationalism in an implicit and sophisticated way to advocate a unified national identity both to its citizens and to the overseas Chinese community. In particular, I analyze the lyrical meanings, musical performances, and audience responses toward two versions of “I love you, China,” one of which serves as an unofficial anthem and the other, popular music. I also highlight two nationalistic themes—the Chinese Dream and the root-seeking—that have been repetitively accentuated by
different participants in the show. These two rhetorical themes, visible in lyrics, conversations, opening remarks, and promotional videos, contribute to the show’s intention and ambition to be in line with the politically correct ideology. Additionally, as an important narrative of nationalism, the voices and performances of minority ethnic groups are also indispensable in the construction of national unity and solidarity. I specifically focus on three successful minority contestants and discuss how their impressive performances in the show both demonstrate the active roles the minority groups have played in the national discourse and suggest the necessity of allowing heterogeneous voices of minority groups to be heard in the Han-dominated society.

Chapter Four deals with gender identity and gender roles. With a genealogical understanding of gender and gender roles in the Chinese music scene as background knowledge at the beginning of this chapter, I investigate how traditional Chinese gender roles that see men and women within the framework of family lineage are still prevalent and powerful in contemporary Chinese society. Judges and contestants in the show see each other as family members, instead of in heterosexual romantic relationships. Gender-and-age-based honorifics are widely used to address each other, indicating women’s continuing subordination and suppression in the patriarchy society. The making and performing of music, not only in the show but also in the industry, suggest the serious gender imbalance, as the social norms confine men and women with different social responsibilities. The discussions of androgynous voices and bodies further interrogate and challenge the conventional understanding of gender and gender roles. As can be seen in the show, non-normative gendered voices and bodies are not completely discriminated or
banned, which indicates the loosening grip of the central government on gender representation and a growing social leniency toward more gender-diversified voices in the society.

Chapter Five is an extended discussion of voice diversity, but from the perspective of social stratification. In the process of commercialization, urbanization and globalization, China has witnessed the formation of different social groups and new class cultures. The current social stratification is largely different from that in history and is still evolving, which makes it more interesting to see how the class culture is reflected in a music competition show. In *The Voice of China* and the rebranded *Sing! China*, voices are made and heard by contestants from various social backgrounds. I explore three roughly categorized social groups in the show, according to various forms of capital possessed by them and different musical tastes they have formed in their upbringing. Then I borrow the three measurable aspects of the modern common sense of the professional in American society—money made, time spent, and quality of practice—to examine the social difference between professional musicians and amateur musicians in Chinese society. Such an examination substantiates the superior social status enjoyed by established professional musicians and explains the very reason why musician nowadays becomes a much-desired career among young people. The voice diversity is also constituted by contestants from geographically different and economically disparate places. These places, economically and institutionally defined since China’s reform era, become indicators of one’s social origins. At the end of this chapter, I conclude with the argument that although the voices made by socially different contestants only represent a small portion of the billions of population, *The Voice of China* and
the rebranded *Sing! China* serve as the very venue for these voices to be made and heard.

Chapter Six reviews the previous chapters and incorporates different aspects of identity into the intersectional lived experiences. I utilize the Western-originated theory of intersectionality to examine how individuals and social groups are excluded, marginalized, and oppressed by institutional systems and social norms. I point out that the four seasons of *The Voice of China* and the first two seasons of *Sing! China* offer a prime site to understand how the discourses of politics, (trans)nationality, ethnicity, gender, and class intersect with each other in the situated context and subject all participants of the show—contestants, judges, audiences, producers—to a multiplicity of oppression, discrimination, and marginalization. I conclude at the end of this chapter that such a discussion, hopefully, can raise the cultural awareness to challenge institutional power and social norms in order to hear the diversified voices in Chinese society.
CHAPTER II. UNCHANGED THEMES: THE BLIND AUDITION, THE VOTING SYSTEM, AND THE MUSIC

On February 27, 2017, the Hong Kong International Arbitration Center made another ruling on the legal dispute over the rights to the brand name “The Voice of China” between the local producer Star China Media (SCM) and its original format owner Talpa Global. The court ruled that Talpa Global had the ultimate rights to the Chinese and the English titles, the original logo, and any relevant images used in publicity, promotions, and auditions (Weerasekara, 2017). Despite the yearlong lawsuit drama, SCM did not stop the global recruitment of the rebranded show Sing! China. For example, due to Nathan Hartono’s achievement as the runner-up in the first season of Sing! China, the local organizer and publicity partner in Singapore had launched the selection process for the second season early, aiming to find another standout to represent the country in the most well-known Chinese pop singing competition show (SingPost, 2017). At the same time, the promotion and recruitment of the second season proceeded in Australia, America, Europe, and other Asian countries.

Given all the ugly facts revealed by the lawsuit, the show, under a dubious new name, has still been attracting global attention in the Chinese community. Putting aside the name change, new logo, and some adjustments to the stage setting, the most prominent elements of the show—the blind audition, the voting system, and the music—have stayed the same. And, the show’s intent to look for the unique voice that can represent China has never changed. As one of its biggest selling points, the blind audition not only serves to draw audience attention and to create
a media sensation, but also functions to openly address the issue of fairness and to challenge the social norms on aesthetics. The voting system, not mass-participation-oriented and not the focal point the show, narrates the ongoing power struggle between the democratic forces and the state control in China. Music is what connects the blind audition and the voting system, the contestants and the audiences, the personal voice and the national voice, and many other visible and invisible elements of the show.

The blind audition, voting system, and music are not only functionally necessary and unique to the show but also reflect and deepen the epistemological understanding of Chinese society. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how these three elements work in the show and how they contribute to the everlasting enthusiasm created by the show. In a project that considers the show as the venue to explore the relationship among identity, media, and popular music in a larger society, it is important to start from the basics that provide the potential readers with knowledge about the show itself as well as the social-cultural soil where the show was produced, distributed, and consumed.

In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the show, highlighting a selection of performances, unique personalities, and media criticism. In my examination of the blind audition, I trace its origin, analyze its application in the show, demystify what has been blinded and who has been blinded both inside and outside the show, and elaborate how the specific setting serves as a venue for the ordinary Chinese viewers to engage with an illusion of fairness in a society where discrimination and bias are common and powerful. I then explore how the
voting mechanism in Chinese popular media has experienced ups and downs, how it has been re-created in the show, how it symbolizes the fantasy of democracy for ordinary Chinese citizens, and how, as a form of controlled democracy, it is a negotiation of power between the public and the state. Next, I move to a discussion of the discourse of music, investigating how music is hybridized and represented in the show and how it signifies deeper political and cultural meanings in the society. I conclude with the argument that societal discourses on the blind audition, the voting systems, and the music, on a singing competition show subject to strict censorship and required to align with politically correct ideology, reveal growing public awareness of and concern with issues of equity and fairness in the cultural arena of traditional aesthetic standards as well as the societal arena of electoral politics.

**The Voice of China and Sing! China: An Overview and Some Highlights**

On July 13, 2012, *The Voice of China* debuted on the Zhejiang Television network. Based on the original *The Voice of Holland*, the premise of the show was to look for new singing talent through public auditions. Each season of the show consists of three main phases: blind auditions, battle rounds, and live performances. Each season begins with a blind audition during which four judges form their teams of contestants whom they mentor through the remainder of the season. Unlike other popular talent show formats such as *Idol* and *Got Talent*, *The Voice* format is intended to set the selection criteria solely on aural aesthetics in order to avoid any possible bias caused by the visual distraction of contestants’ physical appearance and stage manner. Thus judges make their decisions based on the contestants’ vocal power and clarity. In *The Voice of*
China, all of the judges sat on chairs facing away from the stage. Then the judge pushed a button and the chair would turn around to face the stage, and whoever did this can enjoy the rest performance of the contestant. In Sing! China, chair turning has become chair sliding—as soon as the judges pushed the button, the chariot-like chair each judge sat on descended toward the stage along a 15-foot slope. However, both versions of the show operate in the same principle of blind audition. Judges were not able to see the auditionees until they decide to recruit the person to their team. If more than one judge choose the contestant, it is in the contestant’s power to pick which team he/she wants to join in; if nobody elects to recruit he contestants, that person fails the blind audition. Each judge eventually has a maximum number of contestants on their team, which has varied from season to season.6

Both shows follow the similar format for the remainder of the competition. In the second stage of the show, the four judges train their contestants with the help of renowned singing artists or musicians called “Dream Coaches” (“Trusted Advisors” in other English-speaking franchises) who are renowned singing artists or musicians. Coaches provide professional advice on the singing and performance skills as well as tips for a successful music career and life experiences. After training, each coach pairs two team members to have a duet performance and chooses one to advance to the next stage. This is called the battle round. Following the battle round, the playoff stage randomly pairs contestants and each performs a solo song, after which the main

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6 The number of contestants each judge/coach has varied in different seasons. In Season 1 and 2, each team had fourteen contestants from the blind auditions. In Season 3, there were sixteen contestants while in Season 4 the number dropped to twelve for each team. In Sing! China, the number further dropped to ten.
coaches narrow down their team to four members. With four surviving members on each team, they compete head-to-head against members from another team, with votes cast by both the coaches and a media-judging panel,\(^7\) determining the best four contestants who will advance to the final performance.

In the final phase, the remaining contestants compete against each other in live broadcasts at different stadiums. Starting from Season 3, Beijing National Stadium, known as the Bird’s Nest, designed for the 2008 Olympic Games, became a regular place for the finales. To perform in this iconic venue symbolizes the highest national honor and pride. Unlike other *Voice* franchises that implicitly have money and fame bestowed upon the winner, *The Voice of China* and the rebranded *Sing! China*, along with many other talent shows in China, tend to refrain from the articulation of fame and profit, even if these are eventually and paradoxically recurring topics associated with the shows. The hidden code of conduct in the show is to advocate the traditional idea of seeking happiness in harmonious social relationships rather than in material possessions and indulgence, but it fails to consider the fact that income inequality is still the main factor for Chinese people’s unhappiness (Yang, 2014, p. 532; Ip, 2011). The finale is more like a live concert than a competition show that features both audio and visual sensations and celebrates a successful months-long musical journey. Such a live-broadcast event is in accordance with Dayan and Katz’s (1992) three qualifications of media events: an interruption of daily media

\(^7\) Unlike other *The Voice* franchise that use the public vote to decide the winner, *The Voice of China* relies on a media judging panel that was made up of veteran record producers and music critics, together with media practitioners from various media companies. See more discussion of “voting system” later in this chapter.
routines on the syntactic aspect, a presentation with reverence and ceremony on the semantic aspect, and the potential to excite a large audience and renew loyalty.

Since its debut, the show, under the name of either *The Voice of China* or *Sing! China*, has become an annual summer event anticipated ardently by Chinese audience. Each season premieres on a Friday night in mid-July and concludes on the night of October 7, the last night of the Golden Week of the Chinese National Day. Each season devotes a set number of episodes to the blind auditions in which judges build their musical teams. Na Ying, one of the living legends of the Chinese music world, is the only judge who has participated all seasons till 2017. Her coachees Liang Bo, Zhang Bichen, and Zhang Lei were the winners of season 1, 3, and 4 respectively. Having trained multiple champions has later become her marketing strategy to win over contestants in the blind auditions. Wang Feng, the leading figure of Chinese rock music, started as a recurring judge since the second season of *The Voice of China*. His appearance in the show became a lure for young rock musicians who came to follow his rock spirit. Harlem Yu, the Taiwanese musician who is widely acknowledged by Chinese audiences for his bold experiments fusing different musical genres in the Mandopop music industry, participated in three seasons of *The Voice of China* and one season of *Sing! China*. Other judges who appeared in only one or two seasons have still left memorable impressions on the screen. Liu Huan, one of the founding

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8 The legal holiday for Chinese National Day is three days. The 3-day is usually connected with the weekends ahead and after, hence people can enjoy a 7-day break from Oct. 1st to 7th, which is known as the “Golden Week”. For some years, if the mid-Autumn day, according to Chinese lunar calendar, happens to fall in that week, the 7-day break can be extended to eight. The first season of the show had its finale on September 30, the mid-Autumn Day and also the night before the National Day.

9 Mandopop refers to popular music performed in Mandarin. It is usually considered as a subgenre of Chinese popular music (C-pop), along with Cantopop, popular music performed in Cantonese and Hokkien-pop, popular music performed in Hokkien. Mandopop is popular in Mainland China and Taiwan, as well as other Mandarin-speaking communities around the world.
fathers of Chinese popular music and the musical icon of the nation, was a judge on the first season but later turned to the *Voice*-format-like talent show *Sing My Song*, a show aiming to search for the nation’s most original songs. Yang Kun, a popular singer-songwriter who is renowned for his uniquely coarse and heavy singing voice, attended two seasons and later became the judge of *Sing My Song* as well. Season 4 started to feature the Taiwanese musician Jay Chou on the coaching panel. Chou, seen as “undeniably the most popular Chinese singer in a number of Chinese communities” (Fung, 2008), has become one of the selling points of the show to draw more young audiences. Two more Taiwanese musicians, A-Mei and Chyi Chin, coached one season respectively. HongKongese musician Eason Chen was newly invited to the second season of *Sing! China*.

Celebrity judges in the show have presented both their musical expertise and unique personalities. For audiences, to watch them give professional feedback is to both enrich their musical understanding and assess their ability to appreciate a musical piece. At the same time, to watch the judges struggle to make their choices and fight over contestants has become an entertaining experience because the show, as a reality TV genre, allows the audience to see the ordinary side, or what Rojek (2001) has called the “veridical self,” of these celebrity judges. For example, the recurring female judge Na Ying, known for her straight-talking and buoyant personality, always tries to trick other male judges into forming an alliance in order to win over the best contestants. Wang Feng was teased by the audience about his wine bottle-like glasses that made him look weird. Soon after the broadcast of that episode, the e-commerce platform
Taobao, Chinese version of e-Bay, started to sell stickers in the image of Wang’s eyes. Yang Kun repetitively mentioned his thirty-two concert tours as a lure to persuade the contestants to join his team, which was teased by other judges constantly. Later, the number thirty-two became a slogan for his team.

The real focus of the show, however, is undeniably the contestants. In the blind audition stage, prior to each performance, there is always a 30-second narrative in which the contestants tell who they are, why they come to the show, and what unique personal stories they have. This preliminary exposure of personal identity, highly constructed and edited, not only serves to introduce the contestants but also suggests to the viewers that this is the place where the ordinary can be transformed into the extraordinary and where the dream can come true. Indeed, the show has produced quite a few personalities. In Season 1, the new college graduate Zhang Wei astonished four judges with his androgynous voice and extremely high pitch. Na Ying successfully convinced him to join in her team and helped him eventually win fourth place in Season 1. In Season 4, a 21-year-old college student Leon Lee from Australia who sang a mash-up of rap, R&B, and the Beatle’s “Yesterday” (1965) with a deep, soft, but manly voice, surprisingly won a high number of votes from the studio audiences and advanced to the finale as an additional fifth finalist. Still in Season 4, an ethnically Chinese Tai teenager Lang-ga-la-mu astonished all four judges and audiences by her indistinguishable vocal performance of the cover version of “Endless Word” (1972), one of the signature songs of the 1980s Taiwanese musical

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10 The stickers are used on eyeglasses to pretend that the eyes are wide open. Some people use it to get away with being seen sleeping during work time. See [http://news.jnwb.net/2014/0818/87683.shtml](http://news.jnwb.net/2014/0818/87683.shtml)
legend Teresa Teng. Other memorable contestants include the nineteen-year-old high school graduate Zheng Hong who impressed the judges by singing an uncannily-Adele-like rendition of “Someone Like You” (2011), the bald singer Ping An who performed the patriotic song “I Love You, China” (1979) with a clear voice and perfect skill, the witch singer Wu Mochou whose unconventional singing style was heavily criticized by the audience, but eventually became the runner-up in the first season of The Voice of China, the established female singer Yao Beina who came to search for her simple and authentic self but caused an immediate Internet discussion about professional singer’s legitimacy on the show,11 the sunshine boy from Los Angeles Will Jay Behlendorf who surprised the judges by his bilingual performance of “Lemon Tree” (1995) while skillfully playing the ukulele, and the lead singer of a Hong Kongese band Rocky Chan whose performance of a classic Cantonese song re-visualized the golden age of Cantopop of the 1980s. These names, among many others, have not just confirmed the show’s capability to transform nobody into somebody, but also have created new media dynamics and mark a new history of Chinese popular music.

The show, under either name, The Voice of China or Sing! China, has undoubtedly created remarkable scenes both in Chinese popular media and in society. By no means is it a simple entertainment show produced in the trend of global reality TV and passively consumed by mass audiences. It is, more importantly, a show that narrates the most contemporary political, social,

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11 Yao had won a few professional singing competitions in China, including the well-known CCTV’s National Young Singers Televised Contest (Quanguo Qingnian Geshou Dianshi Dajiangsai) in 2008. Before coming to The Voice of China, she performed at the closing ceremony of Beijing Olympic Games and was known for her singing of the theme songs of several high-rated Chinese dramas as well as the Mandarin version of Let It Go in the Disney animated movie Frozen (2013). She died in 2015 of breast cancer.
and cultural ideology of Chinese society in the discourse of globalization. The discussion of the specific features in the following sections—the blind audition, the voting system, and the music—contributes to an understanding of how the show both reflects internal Chinese social dynamics and connects the nation to the external world.

**The Blind Audition: An Illusion of Fairness**

The concept of the blind audition comes from Goldin and Rouse’s (2000) observation of a change in the selection process of American symphony orchestras from the early 1970s to the late 1980s that involves hiding the identity of players from the jury. This unique procedure has been defined by them as the blind audition. Goldin and Rouse conduct the study to quantitatively test if gender identity has made differences in the hiring process and if the blind audition contributes to the democratization of the selection procedure. In particular, Goldin and Rouse describe how, in different rounds of live auditions, candidates had to play behind large pieces of heavy cloth suspended from the ceiling of the symphony hall while the jury rated their performance on a sheet of paper that contained only an identification number. Goldin and Rouse argue that blind auditions are truly blind due to the limited time for candidates to show their individuality and the minimal possibility for the committee to successfully identify the right person, but the final auditions are rarely blind in which music directors sit in and wield strong power that can ignore the audition committee’s decision.

In 2010, *The Voice of Holland* first introduced the concept of blind audition to the popular media, aiming to highlight the pure vocal quality and ignore the role looks have played in talent
contests (The Voice, 2017). In line with the original purpose of the blind audition as practiced by American symphony orchestras, the show attempts to create an unbiased space for vocalists to best demonstrate their voices. But there are three major differences between The Voice format and the American symphony orchestras regarding the way they apply blind audition to practice. First, The Voice is a singing competition show highlighting the performance of popular music while American symphony orchestras are professional musical ensembles featuring classical music or serious music, in Adorno’s (1941) term. On the one hand, the blind audition used in The Voice format aims to create the most entertaining effects on media that can attract more audience attention and achieve the marketing purpose. American symphony orchestras, on the other hand, use blind audition to select the best candidates whose musical talent can help the team achieve the utmost dramatic momentum (Adorno, 1941). That is to say, if the blind audition in American symphony orchestras serves the basic function of selecting the best by the fairest way, The Voice format uses it not only to find the best but more importantly, to satisfy the entertainment needs of mass capitalistic consumers.

The second difference lies in the audition target. In orchestral auditions, the selection committee examines how well each candidate plays with his/her instrument and how well their performance fits into the instrumental ensemble. As described by Goldin and Rouse (2000), in the blind audition each candidate has only about five to ten minutes to play and “there is little or no room for individuality to be expressed and not much time for it to be detected” (p. 722). Despite some criticism of it, the blind audition is still considered an “enormously significant
validation of the musicians selected for orchestra positions” in a contemporary study of the League of American Orchestra (Rabkin & O’Connell, 2016, p. 23). In the broadcasted blind audition of The Voice format, the four judges listen to the real human voices that can differ from person to person because of the pitch, volume, timbre, as well as pronunciation, articulation, and the way the singers deliver with the company of musical instruments. This supports the assertion that voice has a fingerprint-like feature that can easily identify every individual. When it comes to singing, the voice becomes more identifiable because as Sundberg (1987) had contended, a singer can adjust their vocal tract to achieve the specific quality of a singing voice.

The third difference between the blind audition formats of the symphony orchestra and The Voice is the audience body. In the orchestral audition, players are required to audition live in three different rounds. In each round, the selecting committee is composed of both the judges and the audiences. Their professional ears allow them to vote for the most qualified player. The Voice of China, along with other The Voice franchises works differently. The blind auditions, recorded and also highly edited, are only a small part of the whole audition process. Pre-auditions, not blind, occur in selected cities around the world months earlier than the broadcasting of the show. Grey (2015) describes the bustling scene of the preliminary audition of The Voice of China Season 4 in Australia in which the local contestants have to perform in front of judges onsite who gave feedback and made the final decision of who to leave and who to stay. On the official website of European recruitment Season 4, it writes clearly, “[T]he organizer will select talented contestants who will be invited to the Studio Auditions ... The Top 15 will be selected for the
European Audition Finale ... The ultimate winner will represent Europe to enter ‘The Voice of China’ – Season 4 in China!” (The Voice of China, 2015). But these pre-auditions will never be broadcast because they are raw and not juicy enough for a reality TV show. Unlike the candidates for the orchestral auditions who only perform to professional musicians, the contestants of the show have to face a variety of audiences, consisting of producers, onsite judges, blind audition judges, studio audiences, and media viewers of the show. But among them, only the four judges appearing onscreen during broadcasts actually participate in the blind audition process. The rest of the audience body is privileged to watch the entire performance of the contestants as well as the process of how the four judges make their choices.

Thus, the blind audition is nothing but a contrived gimmick that intends to attract audiences’ attention and a utopic tool through which ostensible fairness may be achieved. Such intention and illusion fit exactly into the mythical feature of reality TV—being able to create heavily edited and polished variations on any original recordings and to portray a constructed reality in order to gratify the needs of audiences and markets (Miller, 2007). In this sense, Neil Postman (1985) was right and farsighted in his discussion of show business that envisioned a world where entertainment, as packaged commodity, blurred the boundary between the real and the constructed. Reality TV, in particular, creates a venue to satisfy audiences’ insatiable appetite for entertainment by promising them access to the real, but only confuses them more with what is real and what is not and confines them in “yet another highly produced product of culture industry” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 16).
Unlike the blind audition in the American symphony orchestra system that aims to challenge gender bias and racial discrimination, the blind audition in *The Voice of China* tends to both question traditional biases regarding the appreciation of looks and body and to offer an ideal solution: creating a fair environment to select the musical talent. Its application in *The Voice of China* seems to have achieved this goal. At least, it was designed, produced, and represented in that way. Most contestants have claimed that they came to the show because the blind audition tends to focus attention on vocal quality rather than physical traits. Those who have made such claims, however, are normally those who are considered physically unattractive in terms of look, body, age, fashion taste, and other visible characteristics under Chinese social norms. In the entertainment industry and popular media, the scholarly defined concept of “lookism,” which “describes prejudice or preferential treatment based on how a person looks” (Tondeue, 2009), is largely existent and very powerful. The potential code is that without pretty face and ideal body, one is doomed to fail no matter how talented one is and the opposite story is also true: with pretty face and ideal body, one has higher chances to be successful.

The tremendous use of media has further reflected the state’s power to regulate the subjected public, to impose normative aesthetic judgment, and to reproduce the hegemonic ideology (Yang, 2010; Wang, 1998). The controversial story of Lin Miaoke, a nine-year-old girl who lip-synched and used another girl Yang Peiyi’s voice at the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games evidences this point. Lin was seen as adorable but lacked a good voice, while Yang had a better voice but had crooked baby teeth and was therefore not as appealing.
The sad fact was that both Lin and Yang might not know the truth because they were too young to be informed and neither did they have any power to change it. According to the general music designer of the opening ceremony Chen Qigang, the reason for doing this was for the national interest because the child on camera needed to be flawless in order to represent the perfect image of the country (Yardley, 2008). The sadder fact was that the vast majority of Chinese were too busy enjoying the opening extravaganza and celebrating the national glory to know the ugly fact; furthermore, they were unable to get access negative reports and online discussions about the lip-syncing drama because it had been removed by the government (Magnier, 2008). This media event affirms three realities in Chinese society: one, physical appearance has a huge impact; two, the old saying “seeing is believing” has become hardly convincing in the era of media; and three, the state is still holding the power to blind its people from the real.

Those three realities are continually effective and particularly powerful in The Voice of China. As the show applies the blind audition to the selection process, it not only openly assumes that bias and unfairness caused by lookism exist in the society, but also suggests a challenge to them. The show blatantly communicates to the public that bias and discrimination are wrong and should be re-examined and re-evaluated. In a particular way, the show interpellates the individual viewers as concrete subjects and emphasizes that a traditional way to appreciate beauty is problematic. Instead, a new aesthetic standard should be constructed and promoted in the society. As reality TV, however, the show presents the problem in an interesting way because the blind audition is only blind to the onscreen judges, not to the studio audiences, nor the viewers in front
of a screen. The audiences are privileged to witness the whole process of the blind audition, the
disclosure of which satisfies their voyeuristic pleasure. The peep starts as the contestants move
from the back stage to the front, standing still in the spotlight, and making the first singing voice.
Then the camera shifts to judges, who are either surprised or unimpressed by that voice,
sometimes have short verbal or nonverbal communications with each other, struggle with their
decisions, and eventually turn their chairs or stayed unturned. As soon as a judge turns the chair
and faces the contestant, the blind audition concludes and the moment arrives for the judge to see
if the decision made purely on voice matched the imaginary body.

For contestants, the blind audition creates a space for the fairest competition opportunity to
show their musical talent. For judges, the only subjects to be blinded, the blind audition is a test
of their professionalism, their personal taste for musical appreciation, and their prophetic visions
for potential musicians. For audiences, both in the studio and in front of different media outlets,
the blind audition demystifies the selection process of a televised talent contest, confirms the
existence of the bias and unfairness caused by lookism, discloses the problematic aesthetic
standard in contemporary Chinese society, and more importantly, offers a channel to fulfill their
voyeuristic pleasure to see celebrity judges drop their jaw, to watch contestants perform and self-
enjoy in front of blinded judges, and to fantasize about being in the foreground of public
attention. For producers, the blind audition is a smart industrial strategy to meet contestants’
needs, to satisfy audiences’ curiosity, and to eventually achieve the profitable goal.

The simple use of the blind audition in the show not just brings sensational twists for the
viewers, but also generates thoughts on social norms, aesthetic criteria, and power dynamics. The constructed blind auditions promise the society that they create a unified criterion for aesthetics and a venue for pure fairness. But as soon as the show enters into the second and the third stage of competition—battle rounds and live performances—the imagined venue for fairness collapses. The selection criteria on looks and body for musical talents return to the public attention. It is not necessarily the case that the contestants with good looks and ideal body always outshine those only with good voices. But it is definitely true that those with attractive physical features and not bad vocal quality have much better shots to advance not just in the competition, but also in their musical career, while those with a beautiful voice but sadly without pretty faces and ideal bodies got eliminated quickly in the show. For some lucky contestants, even if their phenomenal voices enabled them to go further in the show, they were soon submerged by popular media and forgotten by the public. That being said, the blind audition is by no means the only mechanism effecting the competition results. The voting system definitely plays a fundamental role in the selection process, and of course, the music is another decisive factor keeping the show alive and popular. The following section examines how the voting system and the music effect the progress of the show and what messages they tend to convey in Chinese society.

The Voting System: Controlled Democracy

Audience voting was introduced as a central strategy for the broadcasting industry to capitalize on audience desires to boost the outcome of a particular reality TV show, both in terms of income and viewer loyalty (Enli & Ihlebaek, 2011). The earliest examples include the vote-out
system in *Big Brother* that calls on the show’s viewers to evict the contestants they dislike and the vote-for system in the *Pop Idol* format that encourages the audience to vote to keep their favorite performers. Slogans like “You decide!” (*Big Brother*), “But this time you choose!” (*Pop Idol*) and “If you want to have your say” (*The Salon*) proliferate, indicating an increased participatory relationship between viewer and screen (Holmes, 2004a). In addition, the continuing progress in digital interactive technologies allows audiences to actively engage with a specific program and to intervene in its course (van Zoonen, 2004).

Scholarly conversations regarding audience voting concentrate on two themes: interactivity and democracy. The discussion of the first theme considers audiences as active consumers, customers, players, and participants in the program (Syvertsen, 2004) and their participation, voting via phone-ins and text messaging particularly, can generate a considerable amount of revenue (Bignell, 2005). Thus the industry benefits from loyal reviewers’ economic contribution while viewers feel empowered in influencing the show’s outcome. The reciprocity brought by the voting system represents a micro arena for the negotiations of power between viewers and the media industry (Enli & Ihlebaek, 2011). The discussion of the second theme considers the voting process in various reality TV shows as a parallel to the voting in political elections. Both require a commitment to candidates and a willingness to vote. Meizel (2011) sees the audience voting system in *American Idol* as “the pinnacle of consumer choice camouflaged in the familiar trappings of democratic process” (p. 3). Holmes (2004b) and Fairchild (2007) have questioned the authenticity of the show’s democratic voting systems: since viewers can only vote in certain
stages, their agency is consequently limited by the producer.

The audience voting system was first introduced to China in 2004 with the launch of the non-copyrighted local Idol show, Super Girl. The 2005 season brought the most viewership largely due to its vote-in mechanism. In the three-hour long finale, the would-be champion Li Yuchun received 3.5 million text message votes while the runner-up Zhou Bichang got 3.27 million votes (Cui & Lee, 2010). Despite the huge power the viewers had, their votes were counterbalanced by the professional judges and the popular judges. The popular judge panel, consisting of media representatives, was actually an invention in the Chinese media context and their engagement in the voting process indicated the show’s attention and ambition to establish stronger public credibility. Their involvement, according to Yang (2014), “creates the most sensational suspense in the show as the audience, both inside and outside the studio, nervously watched dozens of popular judges, one by one, walk up toward the two boxes placed in front of the two contestants and cast their ballots” (p. 523). This pattern has later been repetitively employed in many reality TV shows in China.

Due to the massive audience engagement to choose their favorite “super girl,” the show was seen as “paradoxically the most commercial and the most democratic reality show in China” (Yang, 2014, p. 518). Scholars who celebrate the democratic success of Super Girl generate two main arguments (Meng, 2009). First, the show, for the first time in history, allowed Chinese audiences to enjoy the enfranchisement to pick their favorite candidate. Second, fan communities were formed during the broadcasting of the show, engaging both online and offline discussions
and campaigning for their favorite contestants. These two arguments reflect ordinary Chinese people’s burning desire for an imagined suffrage in a country where political voting and electoral campaigns are not commonly practiced.

Unfortunately, wary of the potential social unrest instigated by the mass voting system, government regulators responded swiftly. In March 2006, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), the executive branch under the State Council, first issued a notice to ban the broadcast of regional rounds of talent contests on provincial satellite television (Zhang, 2006). In the case of Super Girl, among the 46 episodes of the 2005 season, 39 were dedicated to the regional contests that contributed significantly to the ratings of the national finals and the gradual buildup of audience attachment (Yang, 2014). In 2007, SARFT further announced that voting was only allowed among the studio audience, and strictly profited any forms of out-of-studio voting. Thus, the popular vote has been completely banned from Chinese media. Due to state regulations and censorship that discourage the continuing progress of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006a) and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006b) in the Chinese media landscape, Super Girl, along with many singing contests, had to be called off, leading to the statement that the talent-based reality shows were dead in China.

In the summer of 2012, after several years’ of waiting, The Voice of China, with the unprecedentedly unique blind audition, reclaimed reality-show magic amongst viewers (Lu, 2012).

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12 The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) was merged with the General Administration of Press and Publication in 2013 to form the State Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT). Its main task is to administrate and supervise any state-owned enterprises engaged in the television, radio, and film industries.
Huang & Dembs, 2012). In less than a month, it attracted more than 120 million TV viewers and 400 million Internet users and immediately topped the TV ratings (He, 2012). This time, there was neither a popular vote bringing the satisfaction of suffrage nor fervent fan groups campaigning for any contestants. In fact, the voting system, designed by the producer, has been utterly banal. In the blind auditions, four judges vote for their favorite contestants. Since they all face away the stage, they make their judgment simply by aural assessment. As soon as they turn the chairs before the music stops, their voting is accomplished. Their votes are limited by the number of contestants they can recruit in the blind audition stage, which varies from season to season. However, if more than one judge turns their chair, the contestants have to make their vote for a specific judge. In this sense, the contestants are endowed with the agency to vote. This double-vote mechanism has become one of the most exciting twists for the audience because it breaks down both the teacher-student relationship and the professional-amateur dichotomy in Chinese society that situates teacher and the professionals in positions of higher power (Hofstede, 1986; Stebbins, 1992). Thus, to see contestants turn down judges—their potential teacher and the professional musician—is to witness the disempowered gain their agency and the powerful lose their privilege. However, the temporary empowering and disempowering invalidate as soon as the blind auditions conclude.

In the battle rounds, the judges regain their power to vote for the contestants. First, contestants in each group battle against each other. The other three judges and the invited “Dream Coach” give feedback on the performance and provide their recommendation for a
particular contestant, but it is the main coach who makes the final decision of who advances to the next round. Although the main coach gives solid reasons for the personal choice in front of the camera, disagreement and questions always pop up on media. Second, in the cross battle, the remaining contestants from one group compete with another group. At the end of each performance, it is the media representative panel that makes the vote. The concept of using a media panel comes from the voting mechanism in *Super Girl*. Since a real popular vote is out of the question in the Chinese media landscape, using a group of professional media critics then becomes a recurring maneuver in many television contests. Those representatives, sitting not far from the stage and watching the entire performance, vote for a specific contestant by holding up a board on which are written the names of the media companies they work for. But who these people are, how they are selected, and why they are eligible to vote are myths for the audience. Their voting decisions are questioned the most by the audiences. For example, in Season 2, Xuan Xuan and Yao Beina from Na Ying’s group were paired to compete against each other (Episode 11, 2013). Yao, an established singer with perfect singing skill, excellent stage performance, and even better looks, was defeated by Xuan Xuan with a huge difference in votes: 26 to 75. Audiences immediately ignited in discussion about why Yao lost with her flawless performance (Yu, 2013). Another well-known controversy about the media panel’s voting decisions happened in Season 4 when judge Wang Feng was outraged by the biased voting result. In the cross battle, Wang’s students were voted out one after another and when his favorite student Bei Bei, the potential champion of the season was defeated by Lotus Zhang from Harlem Yu’s team (Episode
11, 2015), he burst out, made a short speech to encourage the losing contestants while implicitly blaming the media panel for being unfair towards his students because of the prejudice they hold against him.

Despite suspicion and criticism, the media panel keeps being active and powerful in the show. In the live performance, each coach has one surviving contestants to compete for the title of champion. They were arranged to perform a duet song with their coach as a warm-up, in which no one gets eliminated. In the second round when they started their solo performance, the one with the highest votes advances directly to the finale while the one with lowest on-site audiences’ votes gets eliminated. The media panel gets involved only in the finale when the last two contestants competed against each other. Their votes were combined with the on-site audiences’ votes to determine the winner. Instead of holding a board to be counted by the host, each representative walks from the back stage to the front and touches the electronic V-shape voting machine placed behind the two finalists to cast their ballots. Just like the broadcast of the voting process in *Super Girl* several years ago, *The Voice of China*, again, uses the same maneuver to create the adrenaline pumping moments to both the onsite audience and the media viewers over the selection of the winner.

The voting mechanism in *The Voice of China*, unlike the one in *Super Girl* that ignited discussions about its analogous role to political voting, is but a mere formality to keep the show functioning properly. Without mass participation, the producer can hardly obtain profits from it and its democratic implications work in vain since the state has taken action against it. The use of
on-site audience votes is a clumsy and insufficient substitute for mass voting. No matter how many votes the on-site audiences make, they only represent a minimal percent of the millions of viewers. What’s more suspicious is who they are, how they get there, and why their decisions can represent the whole viewership. These tens of thousands of onsite audiences spend their money voting but remain anonymous. On the contrary, the media representatives, whoever they are and whichever company they come from, play a bigger role in the whole game. They are empowered as early as the battle stages and are always visible on camera. They influence the show not in the same way as the state is censoring and controlling the show, but their power can hardly be ignored. As ordinary viewers, we have no rights to pick our favorite contestants and we have no idea who these voters are and why they can represent the whole audience body to select the winner. However, neither the blind audition nor the voting system has ever been the quintessence of the show. The real and everlasting appeal is the music.

**Hybridized Music: The Everlasting Public Enjoyment**

_The Voice of China_, aiming to look for the unique voice of the nation, not only anthologizes Chinese popular music that has been transformed and hybridized by the flow of foreign popular culture since the late 1970s, but also reflects the contemporary musical understanding and appreciation among Chinese audiences in a rapidly changing political, economic, and social landscape. The songs performed by different contestants may reflect their individual musical taste and represent personal voice, but they together form a sonic palette that includes eclectic voices, timbres, pitches, rhythms, and tones. This musical eclecticism in China has been both
accumulated temporally along the way China has become what it is today and influenced spatially by different cultural flows from across the globe. It is such eclecticism that has created the everlasting public enjoyment both in music and the show.

Scholarly discussion on popular music in the West has often been associated with its nature as a commercial product of the cultural industry consumed by mass audience (Adorno, 1941), as a cultural site where conflict and resistance occur (Street, 1986), and as a political weapon that expresses the life experience of marginalized groups (Hebdige, 1987). The formation of Chinese popular music has generally followed the Western trend but has seen more complicated situations due to historical events. Deng Xiaoping’s “open and reform policy” in the late 1970s started a new era in Chinese history. China’s reformation and reconnection to the world initiated its modernization and globalization in multiple ways: new socioeconomic conditions emerging, cultural developments and aesthetic practices being re-evaluated, and paradigms and ideologies being reinforced (Xiao, 2010). At such a time of change and complicatedness occurred the renaissance of popular music that started to feature hybridity.

The concept of hybridity, accredited to Bhabha (1994), has been extended from the racialized connotation to the semiotic field of culture (Kraidy, 2002), in which diverse cultural elements are constantly exposed to and mingled with each other, and eventually create a new hybrid culture. Ryoo (2009) suggests that the notion of hybridity should be viewed “as a communicative practice constitutive of, and constituted by, multidimensional socio-political and economic arrangement” (p. 143). In an examination of the hyper-hybridity of Mandopop in
Taiwan, Moskowitz (2010) argues that the rich array of cultural mixing produced by the complexity of historical, political, and social factors as well as a transnational flow of capital and people contribute to the melodic and thematic sophistication of Taiwan’s Mandopop. In a similar vein, Chu and Leung (2013) study the hybridity of Cantopop in Hong Kong that comes both from the constant assimilation of Euro-American, Japanese, Mandarin, and Korean songs and the linguistic readjustment among Cantonese, Chinese, and English. Chinese popular music, abbreviated as C-pop, is a meta-narrative genre that includes both Mandopop and Cantopop in a larger ethnically Chinese community, regardless of the difference in politics, borders and commercial practices (Chen, 2012). In a geographically narrow sense, popular music in Mainland China has been deeply and extensively influenced by Taiwanese Mandopop and HongKongese Cantopop, and more importantly, its discursive formation is heavily rooted in China’s particular historical, political, and cultural situation. As indicated by Dunjunco (2002), the hybridity of Chinese popular music can hardly be explained only by the country’s involvement in global capitalism. The political and ideological system that claims its socialism with Chinese characteristics also contributes to the hybridity. In addition, it has also been impacted by different forms of global flows observed by Appadurai (1990). It is due to the flow of people, technology, capital, information, and ideologies that Chinese popular music is constantly revising itself and embracing more hybrid elements.

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13 Socialism with Chinese characteristics is the official ideology of the CCP. It refers to an adapted form of socialism that fits into the particular political, economic, and social situation of China. This ideology supports the creation of a socialist market economy dominated by the public sector. It is a system neither fully market-dominated nor fully collectivized.
Unlike the Western musical genres that can be easily and distinctly identified via melody, rhythm, lyric, and even the musicians’ names, Chinese popular music is a loosely defined umbrella term, under which there are locally originated subgenres such as Xibeifeng (Northwest Wind), Qiuge (Prison songs), and pop versions of Maoist revolutionary songs (Dujunco, 2002; Lee, 1995), adapted musical subgenres such as Chinese rock, Chinese wind, and Chinese folk, and foreign musical subgenres such as hip-hop, blues, jazz, funk, electronic dance music, etc. The Voice of China has been constantly displaying contestants from a larger Chinese-speaking world performing, reforming, and hybridizing most of these subgenres in three minutes segments. For example, in the finale of The Voice of China Season 4, one of the finalists, Chen Zitong, identified as a female rapper, co-performed with her coach Jay Chou one of his signature songs “Extra Large Shoes” (2014). In the first half of the performance, this song was arranged as a jazz composition but the singer rapped the lyrics. In the second half, the singers started to rock the song and in the lyric break, came the accompaniment of violin, cello, and bass altogether. The singers also intentionally added a few English words amid the Chinese’s lyrics. At the end of the performance, the stage has been lit up with choreographed dancing and musicians playing several different instruments, making the whole scene look like a carnival celebration. Such a conscious creation is not just the musical and lyrical innovation of the popular music, but an attempt to make it more amenable to local cultural values and tastes (Moskowitz, 2010). With such creations, music in the show has become more diversified and more accessible to the

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14 As discussed previously, Xibeifeng and Qiuge were two musical styles born in the mid-1980s to the late 1980s. They are rarely visible in the contemporary society because of the changed historical and political situations.
audiences of different musical tastes. After all, to attract audiences from various demographic structures is the ultimate goal of any commercial cultural product.

Since the first season, *The Voice of China* has clearly set the tone for what kind of music the show is promoting. All judges invited to the show have their own established musical genre or distinctive performing style. Na Ying, the most notable and active pop diva in the Chinese music world, gained her fame in the 1988’s CCTV *National Young Singers Televised Contest* by singing the cover song “The Same Moonlight” (1983) of a Taiwanese female singer Sui Ru. Na’s musical style was gradually formed in the 1990s when she started to concentrate on love songs with her recognizably powerful and pristine vocals. Most of the contestants in *The Voice of China* who came particularly for her sang distinctively in the pop music genre, or at least a fusion that heavily featured pop music with other musical genres such as jazz, rock, and folk. Of her three champion students so far, Liang Bo is an emerging pop-rock singer, Zhang Bichen has gained a following in Mandopop and K-pop, and Zhang Lei specializes in Chinese folk music.

Aligning with Frith’s (2001) understanding of pop, a musical assemblage that is hard to define, pop in the Chinese context is similarly too broad to pin down due to its inclusiveness and elasticity. But its imaginary opposite—rock—is easy to identify. To distinguish Chinese rock from its Western counterpart, de Kloet (2010) introduces “rock mythology” that refers to “a set of narratives which produce rock as a distinct musical world that is, first and foremost, authentic,

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but also subcultural, masculine, rebellious, and (counter) political” (p. 26). With a changing political and social landscape, Chinese rock gradually split into the mainstream and the underground. The former has become increasingly visible and well received on media while the latter continues to be rebellious and critical, but only has a limited audience circle. *The Voice of China* demonstrates a transformed rock scene with Wang Feng’s participation in the show since Season 2. Unlike rock musicians in the 1990s whose musical themes and narratives invariably confronted the miserable past and disclosed oppression and alienation (Jones, 1992), Wang endeavors to ponder questions concerning social reality, materialism, and vanity (Yang, et al., 2013) in a postsocialist environment that is flooded with commodification, globalization, and transnationalism. Wang’s music combines versatile genres including psychedelic rock, ballads, rap, and jazz. His lyrics may contain dark imagery and depressing words, but the overall themes are always positive, hopeful, faithful, and sometimes full of passion, ambition and even patriotism. Wang’s transformation and innovation in rock music brought him unexpected success but also incurred accusations of being an unauthentic rock performer (Gao, 2015). However, no matter what controversy Wang holds, he is still seen as a rock icon and favored by contestants and audiences. His songs have been repeatedly performed in the blind auditions, battle rounds, and finales. Each season, quite a few numbers of contestants intentionally have come to follow his rock spirit for it is believed that Wang’s uncompromisingly keen passion for this genre has changed the parameters of this generation’s Chinese rock scene.
Besides pop and rock, other musical genres and styles have also been well received in the show. Jay Chou’s appearances since Season 4 have further popularized once marginalized Chinese hip-hop and re-promoted the regionalized Chinese wind pop. As an iconic musician of Chinese hip-hop, Chou and his rap music have been constructed and marketed toward the Chinese youth. His first publicized appearance at the CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala of 2004 brought the marginalized musical genre into an officially sanctioned scene. Unlike its Western predecessor that was born in impoverished Bronx, and later flourished globally in urban peripheries or in ghettoized city neighborhoods, Chinese hip-hop started out with a striking absence of geographical poverty and blackness. When first introduced to China, hip-hop was translated as “street dance”, but with a completely different connotation. Street in the Chinese context signifies prosperity, modernization, and development, and to dance on the street symbolizes fashion, pleasure, and a cool attitude among urban youths. Hip-hop music is one of the most easily identifiable genres on the stage of The Voice of China due to its musicality and the appearance of the performers. Contestants wear athletic or casual clothes and distinctive jewelry to make the strong statement of membership in the community (Lena, 2012). One of the most prominent hip-hop artists was the 25-year-old female rapper Chen Zitong who eventually became the runner-up in Season 4. Her performance in the show and her positionality as a female rapper was not just a personal achievement but also the triumphant adaptation of the genre to the local culture.
Chou’s other signature musical genre is “Chinese Wind pop.” Chow and de Kloet (2011) define this style musically as a “juxtaposition of classical Chinese melody and/or instruments with trendy global pop styles, particularly R&B and hip-hop,” or lyrically as a “mobilization of ‘traditional’ Chinese cultural elements such as legends, classics and language, implicitly or explicitly in contemporary contexts” (p.60). Chow and de Kloet (2011) further claim that the musical genre aims to reassert “sanctioned, Sinocentric versions of culture and history for a younger generation” (p. 60) that needs to learn about their Chinese roots. A male college graduate Jiang Yuandong in Season 4 who arranged the classical song “The East Wind Blowing Through My Small Lodge Again Last Night” (2010) has best demonstrated this genre. Borrowing stanzas from Li Yu (c. 937-978), one of the rulers and poets of the Chinese Song Dynasty (c. 960-1279), the song is reminiscent of the glorious past and sentimental about the current loneliness and unsuccessful life. Jiang’s thick and mellow voice, skillful blending of chest and head voice, careful delivery of every single word, and emotional engagement elevated the performance to a new level of aesthetic enjoyment. In the second half of the song, Jiang added R&B elements with a stronger drumbeat and a quicker tempo, which made the originally melancholy song even sadder and more desperate.

Western musical genres such as jazz, blues, soul, and funk have been frequently visible in the show but have hardly been accepted by the masses. In the discourse of Chinese popular music, they are considered as foreign, exotic, and too Western to understand. Contestants are surely aware of the risk of performing them in the public gaze. So what they did, in successful
scenarios, was to fuse a specific Western genre with local musical elements. Yuan Yawei, from the first season, impressed coach Liu Huan by arranging Liu’s signature pop song “The Crescent Moon” (1989) with a mix of blues and soul (Hernandez, 2016). In Season 4, the song was picked again by a professional jazz musician Zhan Xiaoli who astonished the four judges with her excellent singing technique. An online commenter even noted that Zhan’s performance visualized a jazz nightclub where people were drinking, smoking, and talking.16 Other memorable performances of Western musical genres include Zhang Shu’s funky arrangement of a sweet and chirpy song “Your Sweetness” (1996), Ma Yinyin’s performance of an original pop-rock song “Three Days and Three Nights” (1999) in a slow jazz and R&B style, Cui Tianqi’s singing of “Mad World” (1982) in electronic dance music, and Bek’s bilingual performance of the adapted “Volare” (1999) in Catalan rumba.17 Among the limited examples mentioned above, Zhan, Ma, and Zhang all picked the Taiwanese award-winning singer-songwriter Harlem Yu as their coach, who has a wide reputation of experimenting with Western musical genres in the Chinese music industry. The inspiration for such experiments, as he mentioned in an interview, came from his early musical enlightenment by listening to the Top 40 on the U.S. Armed Force Radio.18

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16 See the blog at https://skimmedmilkdrama.com/2015/08/08/voice-of-china-season-4-episode-4/
17 “Volare,” written by Italian songwriters Franco Mignacci and Domenico Modugno, was released as a single in 1958. In 1989, Gipsy Kings, a group of flamenco, salsa, and pop musicians from France, recorded an up-tempo version of the song, which topped the Billboard Hot Latin Songs chart in April 1990. See http://www.billboard.com/artist/302873/gipsy-kings/chart?f=363
The song, renamed as “Senorita,” was adapted in Chinese by singer Sha Baoliang. Bek, in The Voice of China Season 4, performed in both Chinese and Spanish, with strong characteristics of Catalan rumba, a genre of music that derives its rhythms from the flamenco rumba, Cuban music, and rock and roll.
The music in *The Voice of China* has, in many ways, demonstrated the hybridized features of Chinese popular music whose discursive formation has drawn from both its historical evolvement and foreign influence. As can be seen from the show, the music may function less as a political weapon than it used to, but its nature as a commercial product has become more and more salient in contemporary society as capitalism has played an increasingly important role in China. The most significant quality music has embodied, however, as this project progresses to understand, is its power to attract people’s attention and to serve as the cultural site where people negotiate their identities. It is in music that Chinese people re-define and re-evaluate who they are and it is in music that Chinese people have everlasting enjoyment.

**Conclusion**

The discussion of the blind audition, the voting system, and the music in *The Voice of China* and *Sing! China* in this chapter provides the contextual background of the show and the socio-cultural soil on which the show was produced and consumed. More importantly, such a discussion aims to explore the convergence of entertainment and politics in the political and cultural context of China and to understand how ordinary Chinese citizens engage with media to negotiate and challenge traditional social norms and state-controlled discourse. In a broad sense, with the loosening grip of the state control over media in recent years, there is a growing democratization of the Chinese political landscape. Yet, in many ways, Chinese audiences remain invested in traditional social norms and are still subjected to the ruling ideology, in Althusser’s (1971) understanding.
The blind audition, despite the illusion of fairness it creates for the audiences, is largely controlled by the producers, who need to consider both the show’s profitability and its compliance with political correctness. At the same time, however, the application of the blind audition to a singing competition show and the broadcast of the show do openly address the problem of traditional aesthetic standards in Chinese society. While it fails to offer any sufficient solutions it surely evokes active and critical thinking on the issue. In this sense, the concern that ordinary Chinese citizens may be too easily drowned in the country’s entertainment media and too happily indulge in a false sense of agency (Wu, 2017) can be countered by recognition of the show’s role in raising the political and cultural awareness of the populace regarding issues of social equity.

The controlled voting system, far from enacting any semblance of democracy, illustrates the power of a small group of people to supplant the voice and contravene the will of the majority. Be it the producers who design the mechanism to achieve their economic and political goals, or the judges who vote as music professionals, or the panel of media representatives who have a big say in the final results, or the onsite audiences who physically attend the carnival-like finales and vote for the favored contestants (Lv, 2006). They are empowered by their privileges, are but a tiny portion of the total audience, and can hardly represent the millions of viewers. From the active popular voting system in Super Girl to the banal, controlled voting mechanism in The Voice of China, the entertainment industry has had to balance three contingencies: creating a system that selects the best contestants; maintaining and expanding market viability; and
conforming to the correct political ideology. In spite of continuous intervention by the state, these attempts reflect the efforts and burning desire of ordinary Chinese to more actively engage in the nation’s political culture.

In align with Groenewegen’s (2011) argument that the overemphasis on politics in accounts of Chinese popular music should be re-evaluated and give way to its polysemous traits, the music presented in The Voice of China has greatly weakened in its function as radical political weapons and seems to have brought more positive messages to the public. But the power music carries and its natural bond with politics can never be ignored.

As three independent structures in The Voice of China, each has respectively served as important sites where the articulation of identity and the negotiation of power between the real and the constructed, and between the state and the public took place. At the same time, the three have been functioning in intertwined and interdependent ways. Without each, the show can hardly be as attractive as it has been. The rebranded Sing! China, under the pressure of being charged again, has rarely abandoned or changed any of the three settings. It is exactly due to the unchanged status that the show continues to be the ideal venue to explore the identity politics and power dynamics.
 CHAPTER III. PATRIOTIC SONGS, NATIONALIST RHETORIC, AND ETHNIC PERFORMANCES: THE REPRESENTATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND NATIONALISM

On October 7, 2015, the last day of the Chinese National Holiday, *The Voice of China* Season 4 had its live finale broadcast at Beijing National Stadium. On the screen, the stadium was first captured by a long shot with the spectacle of dazzling lights and the sound of audience excitement. In the foreground of the shot, national flags of different countries were seen hanging on the roof and slightly waving in the wind, implying the significance of the venue to the country and to the world. In the background of the shot was the stage of the musical extravaganza, glaring under the moving spotlight beams. Then came the voice of the host, announcing the warm-up performance of “I Love You, China” by twenty-eight selected contestants from this season. Among them, eleven were from overseas Chinese communities in Asia, the U.S., and Australia. As the camera shifted from the far end of the stadium to the stage, capturing the onsite audience members waving glow sticks, the symphonic prelude to the song rose. Eventually, the camera lens moved to show a glimpse of all contestants standing on small light-up podiums on the stage. As contestants sang their stanzas one after another, a complicated sentiment started to emerge. The song “I Love You, China,” composed by coach Wang Feng in 2005, narrated a personal passion and pride towards the country. The lyrics have many strong patriotic implications and the musical accompaniment made it even more powerful as the performance went on. Lyrics such as “I love you China, my dear mother,” “I shed tears for you, I’m proud of
you as well;” “I hope you remember me, your child who is still wandering,” and “Whenever and wherever I am, I will always miss you” were sung by contestants from the U.S., Malaysia, Taiwan, and the Philippines as well as by contestants of different ethnic roots. Although on a larger view, these contestants, no matter where they came from, are all of Chinese heritage, to arrange them to sing patriotic songs on a nationally live broadcasting show on the eve of the National Day week at the National Stadium, in many ways, suggests the show’s intention to promote a national identity and to reinforce nationalism in transnational cultural context.

In fact, such an intention has been recurrently visible since the first season of the show. Patriotic songs such as two different versions of “I Love You, China” (1979; 2005), “Descendants of the Dragon” (1980), “Our Dream” (2005), etc. are repetitively performed individually and collectively in different episodes. This obviously aligns with the government’s requirement that singing competition shows should have at least one-third of the performance repertoire that include uplifting themes and promote patriotism in order to stimulate positive emotions in the listeners (Wang, 2012). Outside the show, in recent years, singing patriotic songs has been increasingly popular. Televised national celebrations ranging from traditional festive galas to international sports events, from state-sponsored conferences to nationally broadcast singing contests all have become venues to showcase the performance of patriotic songs and, in a subtle way, for the party-state to propagate its ideology.

In this chapter, I describe the discourse of nationalism in Chinese musical scenes in different historical moments. In conversation with these histories, I analyze various singing
scenarios of “I love you, China,” a Western-operatic version and a popular version, in their larger media contexts, to understand how nationalism and patriotism are reinforced in sonic representations. I identify two nationalist rhetorical themes recurrently addressed and intentionally accentuated by the hosts, judges, and contestants: the Chinese Dream and “root-seeking,” which means to long for and return to one’s roots. I explore the performances of ethnic minority groups and their broader significance in the society. I argue that as a contemporary popular culture product, The Voice of China reinforces the ruling Party’s appropriations of nationalism in a sophisticated way to highlight a unified and supreme national voice. But the show asserts that no single voice can represent the nation; rather, vocal diversity is the voice of China.

The Discourse of Nationalism in Chinese Musical Scenes

Chinese nationalism is a multifaceted and complex discourse due to the different understandings of “nation” at its core.19 Townsend (1996) identifies four different Chinese nations: a) the official state composed of all the PRC citizens; b) the Han nation that is made up of the majority Han population; c) the nation that comprises the PRC and the compatriots of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau; d) the nation that includes Chinese elsewhere around the world who retain a continuing sense of Chineseness regardless of their citizenship. Townsend further

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19 Nation and state are two very different terms in the discussion of Chinese nationalism. Their differences are in fact one of the major factors generating confusion in understanding nationalism. This paper aligns with Guo’s (2004) detailed discussion of these two terms in which he borrows Smith (1991) and Connor’s (1994) definitions respectively. Nation refers to “a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (Smith, 1991, p. 14) while state refers to “a territorial-political unit (the state) whose borders coincide or nearly coincide with the territorial distribution of a national group” (Connor, 1994, p. 39).
contends that the study of Chinese nationalism must take into account all four nations because of their interwoven relationship and their combined contribution to the discourse. Such a contention is in accordance with my observation in *The Voice of China* in which the understanding of the nation is extended to different levels given the show’s ambition to reach contestants and audiences within a Pan-Chinese community.

But what exactly constitutes Chinese nationalism, and how is it specified in musical scenes? Zhao (2004) explores various manifestations of nationalism in China, contending that Chinese nationalism is a product of the mixture of national and social revolution, and thus the content of Chinese nationalism has always been situational and in a state of flux, responding to the supply and demand conditions of a political market (p. 20). Although Zhao does not specify the exact content and in fact, it is almost impossible to do so, his description of two important features of Chinese nationalism—being situational and responding to a political need—corresponds well to the Chinese musical scene. Ho (2006) identifies five thematic changes of Chinese nationalism in relation to music, or musical nationalism, in accordance with the periodization of Chinese history and the political changes. First, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, music was composed to create a sense of nationhood in the face of foreign aggression. Second, during the 1920s and 1930s, nationalism was demonstrated by the promotion of protest songs against

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20 Musical nationalism refers to a music movement that burgeoned alongside political independence movements in Europe in the early 19th century. According to the description in *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* (2006), it was characterized by an emphasis on national musical elements such as the use of folksongs, folk dances, folk rhythms, or on subjects for operas and symphonic poems that reflected national life or history. Kolt (2009) and Murphy (2001) believe that the German scholar Carl Dahlhaus’s scholarship on musical nationalism exerted an influence on Anglo-American musicology due to his suggestion that musical nationalism should be studied in the context of political nationalism so as to determine the correlations between the specific political condition and the music culture in a given nations.
Japanese invasion. Musicians started to compose songs that embedded strong anti-war and patriotic sentiments. Nie Er’s “March of the Volunteers” (1935), which depicted how Chinese intellectuals marched bravely to the frontline of the battlefield, was used as the national anthem for the first time at the World Peace Conference in April 1949 (Luo, 2014). Third, after the foundation of the PRC in 1949 and with the leadership of Mao, music was manipulated to transmit revolutionary socialist ideologies. Workers, peasants, soldiers, and students were encouraged to compose their own songs among which most tended to glorify the CCP, to idolize Mao’s leadership, and to promote socialist values. A plethora of songs produced during this period, labeled later as revolutionary songs, propaganda songs, or red songs, have eventually become the core musical text of contemporary patriotic education (Law & Ho, 2011).

Fourth, as China entered into the reform era in 1978, the music scene started to be influenced by a new economic nationalism that featured a loosening control of the party state, the democratic movement and the exposure to foreign popular culture. As documented by Ho (2006), among the first wave of popular music introduced from Hong Kong and Taiwan in the early 1980s, the most popular ones were nationalist songs that expressed a yearning to be identified as Chinese and a sense of pride in Chinese culture. Songs such as “I am Chinese” (Wo Shi Zhongguoren), “My Chinese Heart” (Wo de Zhongguoxin), and “Descendants of the Dragon” (Long de Chuanren) have become powerful musical representations of Chinese nationalism. The late 1980s witnessed a growing conflict between nationalism and internationalism in Chinese musical scene. Newly emerged rock musicians employed the imported rock genre to express
their dissatisfaction with the society and their desire for change. Cui Jian, the founding father of Chinese rock, has become a central agent of popular resistance against the political systems of the PRC (Ho & Law, 2012). Unsurprisingly, he was banned from the public stage due to his ironic and politically provocative lyrics. But just a few months later, he reappeared as a star performer to represent Chinese popular music in an international sports spectacle because the state needed him as a national icon (Tuohy, 2001). During the reform era, the discourse of nationalism and the music scene were both complicated by fast economic growth and various social conflicts, but what stayed unchanged was the continuing power of the CCP to impose the long-standing ideology of a unified and strong China (Zhao, 2004).

Finally, as the construction of the socialist economy keeps deepening, the contemporary musical scene is further complicated by a flourishing and diversified market. An increasing number of musicians from an extended Chinese community come to pursue their career in the PRC. As long as their music aligns with the politically correct ideology, the state chooses not to intervene in their musical practices. In fact, well-established musicians and boy/girl bands outside the PRC such as Jay Chou, Wong Leehom, Andy Lau, The Litter Tigers, and S.H.E. have been repeatedly invited to perform on the national stage because their music conveys positive messages about Chinese culture and national identity. On the contrary, those who took a different path might be blacklisted immediately on the entertainment market. The famous Taiwanese pop diva Zhang Huimei (also known as A-mei) was banned in the PRC right after she performed on May 20, 2000 at the inauguration of Taiwan’s new president Chen Shui-pian, known as a
supporter of independence. Her concerts were canceled and her public images were removed from television, newspapers, and billboards overnight. A few years later, Zhang returned to the PRC market with a rebranded image of a mega pop star that is musically eclectic, commercially aware, and culturally and politically sensitive. She was also invited both as one of the judges and guest advisor in *The Voice of China*. This incident was but one of many to prove the changing dynamics of the contemporary musical nationalism, the core of which is to highlight a unified Chinese nation, a collective Chinese identity, and a powerful country in the international arena.

With the new trend of globalization and the improvement of technology, the musical scene in the PRC has been reconnected to the world, but the ongoing censorship on music and music-related television shows mandated by the CCP indicates the party’s ambition to maintain its control over the populace. Under such control, Chinese nationalism, in form of a narrow patriotism, is easy and convenient to implement in people’s everyday life. Patriotism, or *aiguo zhuyi*, literally meaning loving the country, is a unifying term used in contemporary Chinese nationalist discourse to express loyalty to the state and a desire to serve it (Zhao, 2004). Shortly after the 1989 Tiananmen incident, the state launched an extensive propaganda campaign of patriotism education, the goals of which “were to rejuvenate China’s national spirit, to strengthen the unity of the Chinese people of different ethnic groups, to reconstruct a sense of national esteem and dignity, and to build the broadest possible coalition under the leadership of the CCP” (Zhao, 2004, p. 9). These goals, concretized and specified in official textbooks, media images, and everyday life, were disseminated to younger generations from kindergartens to universities.
In the musical scene, the promotion of patriotism is a frequent narrative. In 2009, the CCP published a list of one hundred patriotic songs, including earlier revolutionary songs and new patriotic songs to propagandize its reformed political slogans (Gao, 2015). For example, the song “Nation-Family” (Guojia) (2009), a tribute to the 60th anniversary of the founding of the CCP,21 featured Jackie Chan as one of the duo singers and the world-renowned pianist Lang Lang as a co-performer. The song expresses the idea that the wellbeing of Chinese families is based on the stability and prosperity of the Chinese nation. In 2015, SAPPRFT issued a guideline on the promotion of the musical industry in which one of the major tasks is to compose and publish more musical works that can disseminate the socialist core values,22 represent Chinese spirit, and enhance traditional Chinese culture.23 Although not officially written in the guideline, the promotion of nationalism and patriotism is self-explanatory: the socialist core values, the Chinese spirit, and the traditional culture are all explicit signifiers of Chinese nationalism. As the official broadcaster of the CCP, CCTV becomes the venue to spread the messages and ideologies. The extensively explored celebratory event, the annual Spring Festival Gala produced and broadcast by CCTV, is commonly believed to be hijacked by the state and the CCP (Yu, 2009) due to its intention to disseminate and facilitate the patriotic sentiment of Chinese people and its manipulation of the indigenous celebration and entertainment function of the galas. But

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21 See more information about the release of the song at http://ent.sina.com.cn/y/p/2009-03-01/09412396721.shtml
22 The Core Socialist Values is a set of new official interpretations of Chinese socialism promoted at the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012. There are 12 values in the set, written in 24 Chinese characters, including the national values of prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony; the social values of freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law; and the individual values of patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship. See more explanations in Pieke’s (2016) discussion on page 24 in Knowing China: A twenty-first-century guide.
the recent years have also seen a strategic shift of the CCP in propagating the party ideologies from suppressing to accommodating the popular nationalist discourse. Conducting an in-depths analysis of the 2009 CCTV Moon Festival Gala that provides a rich reservoir of moon-inspired traditional Chinese culture, Cai (2014) argues that by skillfully incorporating these cultural elements into a patriotic and nationalist appeal, the state propaganda is more nuanced and creative than it is thought to be. Cai further contends that the state attempts to exert influence on cultural elements and national sentiment by coalescing with political persuasion and propaganda in a subtle but emotionally compelling way. Such a change also corresponds to what Fung (2007) has observed, that Chinese authorities have evolved from a dictatorial authority to an active agent in the productions and distributions of certain popular music that are conducive to and resonant with the national ideologies.

Following Unger’s (1996) statement that Chinese nationalism today seems like Joseph’s biblical coat of many colors, beyond a single easily comprehend sentiment and hardly unified by a single purpose, I focus on several important configurations of Chinese nationalism that are repetitively visible in The Voice of China and have been constantly discussed by audiences online and elsewhere. These configurations, as the concrete signposts of nationalism in contemporary China, not only suggest the party-state’s political strategy but also reflect Chinese people’s perception of the nation and their tactical responses. In the following section, I specify how national identity is embodied in a variety of sonic representations and rhetorical discourses in the show and how the ethnic minority groups are making their voices on the national stage.
Patriotic Messages in “I Love You, China”

As sociologist Karen Cerulo (1993) observes, national symbols such as national anthems and flags may deliver the strongest and clearest statement of national identity due to their power to “create bonds, motivate patriotic action, honor the efforts of citizens, and legitimate formal authority” (p. 244). Ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman (2004) further points out that unofficial anthems may demonstrate even greater national unison than their official cousins because of their immediate historical and modern relevance and their easier accessibility to be performed. Moreover, such songs are always associated with “a populist, almost grassroots sense of intimacy and solidarity” (Kaskowitz, 2013, p. 7). In China, there are a few songs that can be considered as unofficial anthems.24 The Western-operatic version of “I Love You, China,” popularized in the reform era, is one of them, while the popular version of “I Love You, China” is starting to grow as one of the quasi-unofficial anthems in recent years due to its patriotic sentiment conveyed in the lyrics and a powerful tune that can move and mobilize listeners.

Both versions have been performed in different seasons of The Voice of China. The Western-operatic version is a song composed for the 1979 film Overseas Compatriots (Haiwai Chizi),25 which narrates a story of an overseas Chinese family that returned to China but encountered political troubles during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Despite the unfair
treatment, the daughter in the family expresses her unconditional love to the country in her singing voice:

    I love your exuberant seedling in the spring
    I love your fruitful harvest in the fall
    I love your character of the green pine
    I love your temperament of the red plum blossom\(^{26}\)
    I love the homegrown sugarcanes
    That nurture my heart like milk
    …
    I love your blue waves rolling across the South Sea,
    I love your white snowflakes flying over the northland,
    I love your boundless forests
    I love your lofty mountains
    I love the gurgling streams
    That flow with ripples in my dream\(^{27}\)

With the popularity of the film in the early 1980s, the song immediately became a musical hit, particular among overseas Chinese communities. The song has since been frequently performed on national occasions for its artistic merit and patriotic sentiment (Wang, 2008). To sing the song is to extol the grandeur of the country: its vast territory, its bountiful resources, its rich culture, and its noble character. To listen to the song is to enjoy a moment of success and confidence in a new era when political and social chaos had just ended and a new China started to form. With these messages, the song soon became a sonic representation of patriotism targeting the greater Chinese communities with its continuing influence to the contemporary times.

The second version of “I Love You, China” came out much later as a popular song. In 2005,

\(^{26}\) A few plants such as pines and plum blossoms have been frequently depicted in Chinese art and poetry for centuries. They are personified and romanticized as being associated with certain characters such as perseverance and indomitability due to the fact that they show their beauty, the pines’ greenness and the flowers of the plum blossom, amidst the cold winter. See more artistic interpretation of these plants in Welch’s (2013) *Chinese art: A guide to motifs and visual imagery.*

\(^{27}\) The lyrics in this dissertation are all translated by the author.
singer-songwriter Wang Feng issued his new album *The Glorious Bloom of Life (Nufang de Shengming)* that included “I Love You, China” among many other hit songs. Like the Western-operatic version, the new lyrics explicitly express a strong passion for the country:

Whenever I feel the pain, I want you to hug me  
Just like you have always been touching my soul  
Whenever I feel confused, you give me warmth  
Just like someone is holding my shoulders tightly

Sometimes I feel lonely and helpless just like the stones rolling down the hillside  
But I always regain my confidence whenever I think of you  
Sometimes I lose my way just like a swallow straying away from the flocks  
But I no longer feel fearful whenever I think of you

I love you, China, my dear mother  
I shed tears for you and I feel proud of you  
I love you China, my dear mother  
I shed tears for you and I feel proud of you

…

I hope you remember me, your child who is still wandering  
Whenever and wherever I am, I will always miss you  
I hope you know what you mean to me  
Whenever and wherever I am, you are like my life

Musically, the popular version is much easier to perform than the Western-operatic version in terms of vocal range, rhythm, canto and accompaniment. Lyrically, the detailed personal narration rather than the simple description of a beautiful landscape makes the song easier to generate immediate emotional relevance to listeners. Gao (2015) identifies two types of patriotic songs in China: official and unofficial. The former is associated with the government-sponsored attempts to compose songs that are closely tied to the regime’s propaganda rhetoric, while the
latter is of musicians’ individual preference to express their feelings, and more frequently, to meet the demand of the market. In this case, the Western-operatic version is obviously an official patriotic song, while Wang’s version is an unofficial one. But regardless of their categorizations, any patriotic songs can be easily manipulated to propagate the ideology of the controlling power. The following paragraphs describe how two versions of “I Love You, China” are performed and received in The Voice of China and in a few related musical scenes.

The Western-operatic version first appeared in the blind audition of the first season of The Voice of China. Ping An, a Shanghai-born 34-year-old singer, adapted it into a pop song and astonished all judges by his extreme falsetto and excellent singing skills. With a masterful control of the voice and an extraordinary expression of the emotion, his performance was flawless. The personal interpretation of the song was sublimated into a collective patriotic sentiment that stirred a greater national unity in the echoed physical realization of a Chinese “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991). His performance received unanimous acclamation from viewers home and abroad, immediately becoming a signature interpretation of the classic song in contemporary times. But his motive to sing an obviously patriotic song in a singing competition was extensively questioned. On The 4th Media website, an article synthesizes the comments on Ping’s performance from a non-Chinese video-sharing platform in which overseas Chinese audiences described how they were moved by Ping’s performance and how the song

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28 The 4th Media, based in Beijing, is an independent media platform that focuses on the vision of the youths and Chinese identity while engaging in issues of global concerns. The website synthesizes and translates news and commentaries from both mainstream and progressive independent non-Chinese media outlets to the Chinese speaking audience and vice-versa. The article about Ping An is written in Chinese and can be accessed from http://opinion.m4.cn/2012-08/1181121.shtml
aroused their sentiment for the motherland. Along with the compliments, the other theme among these comments is a proposal to stress the artistic merits of the song rather than its political connotation. Comments such as “To love China has nothing to do with politics,” “‘China’ and ‘motherland’ in the lyrics do not represent a specific regime,” and “if people disgust everything about China because of their hatred of the CCP, these people must be narrow-minded like a frog in a well” obviously intended to refute whoever had pointed out the political messages in this song. It is also clear that the comments on this media platform are highly selective from the original video-sharing website, but such a strategy precisely proves that listeners can easily sense a political persuasion in the song.

The popular version of “I Love You, China” first caught media attention in 2013 when Wang was invited to perform this song on CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala. When the song reached the climax, Wang was overwhelmed with passion and fell to his knees. Immediately, China’s media platforms “lit up with criticism of Wang’s display of patriotic fervor, calling it a feigned show of cheap emotion” (Yang et al., 2013). Since then the song became a sonic symbol to express patriotic sentiment in various nationalist occasions. In The Voice of China, the song was first performed in the finale of the first season by Liang Bo, a then college student professionally trained as a pop-rock singer-songwriter. Liang’s musical talent was not outstanding among his peers in this season, but his quiet personality and pokerfaced performances as a rocker (jWc, 2013) was unique enough for him to win one turn in the blind audition and to gain more votes in later rounds. His coach Na Ying spoke very highly of his ability to control the voice and to create
a particular vibe on the stage. As one of the finalists of Season 1, Liang played Wang’s “I Love
You, China” on the eve of the Chinese National holiday. At the climax of the performance, Na
Ying whooped it up on her feet atop her throne and started to lead the on-site audiences to sing
the refrain “I love you, China, my dear mother. I shed tears for you and I feel proud of you.” It
came with no surprise that Liang was crowned as the winner of this season. He was, however,
immediately questioned about his maneuver of picking an ultra-patriotic song at a suspicious
timing (Vittachi, 2012). On the Douban platform, the largest Chinese website for reviewing
movies, books, and music, users formed a discussion panel on the first season of The Voice of
China in which some felt disappointed by the final result, saying that the show easily marked
itself as a show with Chinese characteristics.29

The song came back to stage in Season 4 as a warm-up performance of the finale by
selected contestants from the top forty-eight. This season featured the largest number of
contestants from overseas Chinese communities. To arrange such a performance seems like a
maneuver not only to challenge contestants’ willingness to be included in Chinese cultural, social
and political narratives but also to demonstrate China’s soft power (Tong, 2015) embodied in
musical messages and media images to the global viewership. In achieving the first maneuver,
oversea contestants have to incorporate themselves well into the collective performance of the
patriotic song in terms of linguistic, musical, and emotional expressions. It is difficult to tell how
these overseas Chinese contestants feel when they were performing, but what can be seen on the

29 See the comments in Chinese at https://movie.douban.com/subject/11520120/reviews?rating=
screen is their professionalism: impressive articulation and pronunciation of the lyrics and excellent musical and emotional interpretation. However, given the inflammatory partisan politics across the Taiwan Strait and musicians’ feeling of entrapment among geopolitical conflicts (Hsu, 2013), it is ironic to see contestants from Taiwan sing the lines “Sometimes I lose my way just like a swallow straying away from the flocks” and “I hope you remember me, your child who is still wandering”. Such maneuver is also in accordance with Sun’s (2015) observation of the changing role of Chinese media, that is, to boost China’s capacity to tell its own stories to a larger population and to contest the hegemonic representation of China.

In recent years, both the Western-operatic and the popular versions have started to attract the attentions of international musicians in an extended mediated context. For example, the Western-operatic version was performed in 2012 at the opening ceremony of the 11th “Chinese Bridge” Chinese Proficiency Competition for International College Students by American soprano Sheila Carroll, American tenor Brian Wahlstrom, and Italian tenor Giuseppe Di Stefano. In 2016, it was performed at the closing ceremony of iSING! Suzhou International Young Artist Festival by Russian soprano Valentina Fetisova and American vocalist student Tayloe-Alexis Dupont. In the same year, Vietnamese international student Do Thi Thanh Hoa sang it in a popular singing competition show Avenue of Star produced by CCTV. In 2017, American soprano Juliet Petrus co-performed it with a Chinese tenor Wang Chuangyue in the renowned

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30 iSING! International Young Artists Festival is the first-ever festival dedicated to the vocal arts in China. The festival is organized by iSING! Beijing, a pioneering program that introduces Mandarin as the singing language and merges the Western operatic traditions with modern Chinese opera. The program has attracted musicians from across the global and has been reported by international media agencies such as BBC, MSNBC, Associated Press, New York Times and the TIME magazine. See their website at https://www.isingfestival.org/
annual New Year Concert televised by CCTV.\textsuperscript{31} The popular version is also repetitively performed by international students and musicians residing in China. Examples include the collective performance in the Tenth Anniversary Award Ceremony of \textit{Avenue of Star} in 2014 by Beijing-based American singer Annie Lowdermilk (Tang Bohu in Chinese),\textsuperscript{32} Ukrainian singer Dmitry Kovalev (Ji Mi), Canadian actor Chelsey Mark (Mai Xiaolong), and a girl band \textit{Wuzhou Lamei} consisting of members from China, Cuba, Uganda, Australia, and Russia as well as the trio performance of the song by Australian Hai Yuxiang, Bangladeshi Wu Qiu and Zambian Ma Yuehan\textsuperscript{33} in the award ceremony of the Chinese Bridge 2016 Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreigners across the Globe.

Obviously, a variety of state-sponsored singing competitions and musical festivals have become popular venues to promote Chinese nationalism and patriotism. In these events, international singing artists perform Chinese patriotic songs in a way to showcase their understandings of Chinese culture and their love for the country. As indicated by Tuohy (2001), once assimilated into the musical lives of the Chinese people, the foreign identity could perform national functions. In a larger sense, as Tong (2015) argues, the strategy of imposing Chinese nationalism helps strengthen the Chinese identity within a global context and further reinforce the ideology that the PRC is the center of the Chinese popular culture. Therefore, to sing

\textsuperscript{31} These performances can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnC_d3UO-xU; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkIcKzFBjE; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l060AlYDjQY; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmOeW1rd2w.

\textsuperscript{32} Annie Lowdermilk was one of the duo singers in the second season of \textit{Sing! China} and survived in multiple battle rounds.

\textsuperscript{33} The performers living and working in China all have Chinese names. See the performance at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S63-6O-U-LY; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMV_9gmlBA0&vl=zh-Hans.
different versions of “I Love You, China” is not only to perform, reproduce and represent the national, international, and transnational image of the country but also to propagate the official ideologies and geopolitical strategies (Liu et al, 2015). Besides the sonic representation, there are also rhetorical discourses in the show that illustrate and reinforce Chinese nationalism and national identity. The following section focuses on how they help to achieve such a goal.

**The Reiteration of Two Nationalist Rhetorical Themes**

Calhoun (1997) contends that nationalist rhetoric “offers direct expression to the process of unification through representations of the encompassing nation claimed as the scale of the state or even beyond it” (p. 125). In the Chinese context, since 1980s, the nationalistic discourse was employed as a rhetorical strategy of the CCP to unify the nation. A spirit of nationalism has been inculcated through mediated, public, and interpersonal spaces to the population as well as the world beyond the nation’s borders (Lu, 2012). In order to exploit patriotic sentiments, producers of popular culture artifacts even indulge in the somewhat ironic redeployment of nationalist rhetoric and semiotics (Gregory, 1996). In *The Voice of China*, there are two nationalist rhetorical themes that are recurrently addressed and intentionally accentuated by the hosts, judges, and contestants: 1) the Chinese dream, and 2) root-seeking. The two themes, highlighting different aspects of Chinese nationalism, reflect the show’s intention to closely align with politically correct ideology and to reinforce the national sentiments among targeted audiences.

The Chinese dream is the first theme constantly addressed in the show that signifies a powerful message of nationalism and national identity. Since the launch of *National Young*
Singere Televised Contest (Quanguo Qingnian Geshou Dianshi Dajiangsai) in 1984, singing competitions have become a popular venue for musical talents and enthusiasts to pursue their dreams. Contemporary singing reality TV shows such as Super Girl (2004-2006), China’s Got Talent (2010-2015), and Dream China (2004-2006) all explicitly denote the dream narratives. For example, the slogan of Super Girl is “sing as you want, let dream blossom,” China’s Got Talent’s is “believe in dreams, believe in miracles,” and Dream China openly addresses it in the title. These dream narratives, in a microscopic perspective, aim to motivate participants to realize their musical dreams and pursue their individualities. In a macroscopic perspective, they attempt to disseminate a positive energy in the society through the neoliberal doctrine of self-reliance, self-fashioning, and self-empowerment (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Such attempts are encouraged in Chinese society as they can generate confidence, optimism, positivity, and upward mobility. It works the same way as in the mythology of the American dream, which inspires Americans to better, richer, and fuller lives, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement (Adams, 1931), and in the European dream, which promises to bring humanity to a global consciousness in an increasingly interconnected and globalizing world (Rifkin, 2004). However, when the dream narrative in Chinese context becomes a political slogan, its power and effectiveness need to be reexamined and reevaluated.

As explained in Chapter One, the Chinese Dream became one of the signature ideologies of the new leadership of the CCP in 2012. President Xi Jinping first openly addressed the notion of Chinese Dream when he visited “The Road of Rejuvenation” exhibition at the National Museum
of China on November 29, 2012. The Chinese Dream, built on rhetoric and actions centering on the century of humiliation (Owen, 2015), seeks to achieve the ultimate goal of rejuvenating the Chinese nation. Such a call, as indicated by Wang (2013), is among many attempts made by almost every generation of Chinese leaders to consolidate the Party’s power and rebuild its legitimacy (Kuhn, 2009). But instead of asking the populace to sacrifice personal interests to achieve the grand collective mission, as the previous generations of political leaders used to do, the current leadership of the CCP endeavors to convince the public that the national dream is also for individuals and personal development can only be fully realized upon the achievement of the national dream (Lu, 2015). In an empirical study of Chinese citizens’ attitude toward the Chinese dream narrative, Lu (2015) conducted a survey in seventeen Chinese cities and found that the support among Chinese urban residents is high and real. This indicates that by incorporating personal dreams into the national dream, the Party’s propaganda, brilliant and sophisticated, is working well in the society. Thus, the entertainment industry becomes an important venue to spread the message.

The dream narratives have been explicitly and constantly evoked throughout The Voice of China, as the judges frequently prompt the contestants to answer cliché questions such as, “Why do you come to the show?” and “What’s your dream?” Contestants typically respond with answers that are associated with the pursuit of personal dreams, the dreams of their loved ones, and the dreams of a community they want to represent. Those dreams could be as humble as singing for an ill family member or as grand as making Chinese music heard by the world (Yang,
2014). These individual dreams, in one way or another, contribute to the formation of a national identity that features progress, success, and new glory in the contemporary times. Other dream-related narratives are also visible in different seasons. For example, guest advisors are introduced as “Dream Coaches,” a title that underlines the show’s intention to both help contestants realize their dreams and to align with the dominant political ideology. Dream-themed songs have been frequently chosen and performed individually and collectively by contestants in different seasons. In the finale of the first season of *The Voice of China*, the selected contestants sang the song “The Dream Sky is Extraordinarily Blue” that contains lines such as “Dream is like a promise, engraved in mind, written in front” and “Beautiful dream, like a balloon … however high or low, has never been out of my sight.” Similarly, in the finale of Season 3, the top 64 contestants performed “Our Dream,” with the refrain “this is our dream, a real dream that connects everyone and every heart; this is our dream, a real dream that makes everyone and every heart feel proud.” In different episodes, the host always deliberately and repetitively accentuated the dream narratives by uttering phrases such as “the stage of the dream,” “going to the Bird’s Nest with dream,”34 “this is where your dream starts,” etc. As such, the grand political ideology—the Chinese Dream—was incorporated well into the individual vision by the show, and the Chinese Dream with a national mission has become a powerful motivator for ordinary Chinese people.

34 “Bird’s Nest” is the nickname of Beijing National Stadium, due to its structure resemblance to a bird’s nest. It was the hosting place of the opening and closing ceremonies of Beijing Olympic Games in 2008. As a nationalist building, it is also the finale venue for Season 4 of *The Voice of China* and the first and second seasons of *Sing! China*. To compete at Beijing National Stadium on the National Day break, being advertised by the show as a powerful prize became a repetitive utterance to motivate all contestants.
Another nationalist rhetorical theme is root-seeking, particularly among overseas contestants. In Chinese history, root-seeking refers to a literary movement advocated by Chinese intellectuals during the 1980s to preserve traditional Chinese literary forms, to create a distinctly Chinese voice in literature, and to reconstruct a truly Chinese identity that was damaged during the Cultural Revolution (Spencer, 2013). The cultural meaning of root-seeking was later expanded to describe a “longing for a verifiable identification of personal and cultural beginnings” (Hirsch & Miller, 2011, p. 1). In a more specific way, Wang (1991) elaborates on the understandings of Chinese roots and how the concept is intertwined with the understanding of Chinese identity and Chinese diaspora. According to Wang (1991), the word “roots,” aside from its basic biological meaning and symbolic connotation of life, has multiple meanings in the Chinese context. It is used “to designate one’s birth place, ancestral village, or nativity, and the source from which one derives one’s personal identity” (p. 182). In addition, the concept of roots, with a variety of reference points such as ancestral village, Chinese racial heritage, China as a nation, the Chinese government, and Chinese culture, helps form a racial and cultural bond between overseas Chinese population and the Chinese nation-state.

In his later discussion, Wang identifies one type of identity among Chinese in diaspora—the sojourner mentality, which is closely associated with the narrative of root-seeking in this discussion. The sojourner mentality started with the early waves of Chinese immigrants who encountered hatred, exclusion, insult, and even attacks in the host countries and yearned to return to their native villages in China. This mentality continues to this day due to four major reasons.
First, the social and cultural values of Chinese society hail its people to return home. Traditional Chinese philosophical thoughts such as Taoism emphasizes the returning to the original points as the completion of the life circle (Fu, 1992, p. 60) and the popular Chinese idiom “Fallen leaf returns to root” highlights the importance of going back to where one starts. Second, the changed economic, political, and social environment in recent years becomes incentives for overseas Chinese population. Third, the Chinese government has made systematic efforts to reach out to those who were once considered wandering children. Specific strategies include organizing “roots-seeking” summer camps for young Chinese born overseas (Sun, 2010). Lastly, unjust treatment toward Chinese such as racism, discrimination, and sinophobia are still ongoing, if not worse, in their adopted lands. These four major reasons, from cultural, social, political, and international perspectives, eventually grew into a powerful call to overseas Chinese population.

The overseas contestants in *The Voice of China* have, in many ways, displayed the sojourner mentality. Since the first season, the show has been strategically organizing open auditions in big cities around the world to recruit qualified musical professionals from a larger Chinese-speaking community. Thus, contestants identified as members of the Chinese diaspora from a country other than the PRC have become regular participants. Most of them, either born and raised overseas or having immigrated to the foreign country at an early age, can speak fluent Chinese

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35 The roots-seeking summer camps become very popular in recent years. It is usually sponsored by the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs of the State Council and organized by the local government or educational institutions. See one of the reports at http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/801294.shtml

36 Contestants from Hong Kong and Taiwan have been particularly identified as being from Hong Kong, China and Taiwan, China by the show. Regardless of the political tensions between them and Mainland China, the discussion of sojourner mentality is more associated with those come from Southeast Asia, North America, and Europe.
and are familiar with Chinese culture. Most have expressed their excitement of being back to the largest Chinese singing competition and of feeling the proximity to the country where they left at an early age or where their parents and grandparents used to live. A few of them explicitly uttered the word “roots” either in their monologues before the performance, or in the dialogues with the judges, or in their musical works. In Season 2, Qin Yuzi, a studio singer from the U.S. and member of the Zhuang ethnic group,\(^{37}\) emphasized twice that her roots were in China and she wanted to come back to sing for the Zhuang people. In the second season of *Sing! China*, 33-year-old female Canadian singer Zizi made the strongest personal statement of her cultural roots. In her monologue before the performance, she talked to the camera that she felt the significance of the stage and wanted to find the sense of belonging on the stage. After her performance in episode two, in the conversation with the judges, she described how she felt like she lost many roots after leaving so long. Almost bursting into tears, she continued, “As one of many Chinese immigrants, I try to assimilate into a foreign culture, but have also lost many traits in Chinese culture. When I am here, I feel strongly that these lost traits are gradually coming back. It is the music that helps me refresh my memory about Chinese culture.” In the same season, rapper Angel Mo, also from Canada, adapted one of the signature songs of judge Liu Huang and expressed in her lyrics her determination to take root in China:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Born in China and raised overseas,} \\
\text{I want to take roots here after having completed my degrees} \\
\text{…}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{37}\) The Zhuang ethnic people mostly live in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southern China and some also live in provinces such as Yunnan, Guangdong, Guizhou and Hunan. They form one of the fifty-six ethnic groups in the PRC. See more in Kaup’s (2000) discussion of Zhuang people and the ethnic politics toward them.
I am one of the birds of the new generation flying back to the nest
I want to spread Chinese attitude to the world
Don’t ask where does the river flow
The blood of the dragon is flowing eastwards
The descendants of the dragon are moving eastwards
I am walking to the east
I am coming home

There are still other contestants who implicitly touched upon the narrative of roots in their utterances. The new college graduate Sophie Chen from Canada openly talked about the plan to build her musical career in Shanghai or Beijing in Season 2 of *The Voice of China*. Chinese Malaysian Chen Yongxin in the same season explained how she was raised in Chinese tradition and taught in the Chinese language. Wu Yingxiang from the first season of *Sing! China*, born and raised in Brazil, was asked by her parents to wear Chinese costumes and sing Chinese songs in her upbringing. These examples illustrate overseas contestants’ attempts to maintain a sense of belonging to their Chinese cultural traits and search for an imagined Chinese origin. On the largest national stage, they feel proud to perform their Chineseness, celebrate their reunion with the Chinese language and culture regardless of their own citizenships and diversified growing experiences, and eventually develop or rebuild their bonds with the modernized Chinese nation-state. By performing on the nationalist stage, these “returned patriots” confirmed the integration and interpolation of their imagined motherland (Dai, 2001). As new generations of overseas Chinese grow up, their dual identity also becomes an important channel for China to communicate with the outside world (Ding, 2011) and to spread Chinese nationalism to the international community.
The two nationalist rhetorical themes that have been repetitively addressed in the show—the Chinese dream and root-seeking—demonstrate a strong intention and ambition of the show to reinforce nationalism and national identity, not just among Chinese audiences but also among overseas audiences in a larger Chinese community. But instead of using simple propaganda and blatant political schemes, the show employs rhetoric to address the Party’s ideology of building a strong and unified China. Such a unified country, however, as the show seeks to display, does not have only one homogenizing voice. Instead, the diversified voices of different groups contribute to the formation of the voice of China.

**Minority Ethnic Groups on National Stages**

China consists of fifty-six ethnic groups, among which the Han Chinese is the majority ethnicity, constituting about 91.5% of the total population, while the people of other ethnic groups make up 8.5%, according to the 2010 census. In the preamble of *Constitution of the People’s Republic of China*, the PRC is defined as “a unitary multi-national State created jointly by the people of all its nationalities”. It further states, “[s]ocialist relations of equality, unity and mutual assistance have been established among the nationalities and will continue to be strengthened.” Such a statement clearly indicates the efforts and determination made by the central government to maintain a positive relationship among different ethnic groups and to achieve the ultimate goal of national solidarity and national strength.

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38 See the census in Chinese at http://www.stats.gov.cn/ztjc/zdtjgz/zgrkpc/dlcrkpc/dcrkpcyw/201104/t20110428_69407.htm
The discourse of Chinese nationalism was constructed on the history of the Han people and their shared cultural identities such as languages, traditions, values, and memories. As indicated by Gladney (1996), during the unstable years of foreign invasions in the early twentieth century, Chinese nationalists created an imagined Han nationality as an attempt to mobilize different communities into one overarching national group to prevent the dismemberment of the Chinese state. Such a national assimilation doctrine did contribute to the national independence and unity but led to the loss of cultural identities of some ethnic groups and the rise of separatism among particular minorities such as the Mongols, the Tibetans, and the Xinjiang Muslims. After the founding of the PRC, the CCP adopted a different attitude to deal with the ethnicity issue, stressing equality and autonomy among ethnic minorities and aiming to build a unitary and multiethnic nation-state. As documented by Zhao (2004), with the launch of an ethnic identification project in 1950, a total of fifty-five groups were officially recognized and approved as minority ethnic groups (shaoshu minzu).

The official recognition of minorities was also reflected in the cultural landscape and the musical scene. As observed by Baranovitch (2003), songs of minority groups created during this period were intended by the CCP to unify and solidify different ethnic groups and to propagate and legitimize the new regime among minority populations. Representative songs include “The Sun Rising in the Grassland Never Goes Down” (1952) written from the perspective of the Mongols, “Our Xinjiang Is a Good Place” (1951) from the Uyghurs, “On Beijing’s Golden Mountains” (1964) from the Tibetans, and “Ah Wa people Sing a New Song” (1964) from the
Was, a small minority group residing in southwest China. These songs are easily identifiable due to the ethnic musicality that involves the distinct tempo, rhythm, scale, and musical accompaniments and the lyrical references that pay tribute to the national unity, cultural prosperity, and political optimism. Gorfinkel (2016) defines this type of ethnic music as orthodox-style aiming to address “the Party-state ideology of a happy and united multi-ethnic state entity” (p. 103); it became frequently visible on CCTV during official national celebrations and state-sponsored events. With the growing representation, however, minority groups were still largely marginalized, stereotyped and commoditized in the Han-dominated society, reflecting the common Han view of them as the singing and dancing minorities. Their performances became exotic entertainment either to satisfy a market demand or to fulfill a national need (Callahan, 2010).

In the post-Mao era, the CCP introduced an inducement policy and advocated a limited pluralism in which minority groups accepted the administrative authority of the central government but were allowed to celebrate ethnic distinctions such as languages, customs, and traditions. The policy, understood as China’s affirmative action, has provided preferential treatment for minority groups in political representation, economic benefit, and social welfare. For example, the electoral laws stipulate a certain percentage of minority delegates to the national and regional legislative and administrative institutions. Specific financial policies have been implemented for them including the tax exemptions, governmental investment in natural resources exploration and exploitation, and the establishment of free trade zones in the frontiers.
In the national university entrance examination, students of minority ethnic group have been admitted to university programs with lower scores and minority ethnic couples are not affected by the one-child policy (Zhao, 2004).

As a consequence of the inducement policy, ethnic minorities have become increasingly visible on regional and national stages, both through sonic representation and lively ethnic dances. More importantly, such visibility and audibility indicate the growing agency of minorities to negotiate their ethnic identity and to challenge the orthodox style of minority representation (Baranovitch, 2003). In their study, Liu et al. (2015) also perceive an increasing empowerment of ethnic minorities on the most important national stage—the Spring Festival Gala. By analyzing the ethnic performances in the Gala from 1983-2013, they find that the officially constructed ethnic songs were gradually replaced by *yuanshengtai*, a musical genre that features originality and primitiveness and is associated with rurality, anti-industrialization and anti-urbanization sensibilities (Yuan, 2016). As further elaborated by Gorfinkel (2016), the *yuanshengtai* genre stresses the need to preserve the folk music of minorities in a way to save the essence of Chinese culture and identity in the face of globalization. They are performed and often improvised in local languages and with the accompaniment of the local traditional acoustic instrumentations. CCTV, a regular space to validate and promote this music genre to the national audiences, successfully reinforces the idea that the ethnic cultures are important parts of the national culture and minorities are indispensable in the construction of national identity.
The promotion of the yuanshengtai genre on the national stage confirms the central government’s attempt to incorporate non-Han culture into the national cultural landscape and its willingness to include more diversified voices in the musical scene. For minorities, to perform yuanshengtai music not only allows them to introduce their unique cultures to a larger population but also enables them to bolster ethnic confidence and pride. The ability to perform ethnic music was further privileged in the popular music scene when ethnic minority singers impressed audiences with their extraordinary interpretations of various Chinese and Western popular songs or with the distinctive adaptations of these songs by the use of ethnic musical elements. Since the first season of The Voice of China, contestants of different minority ethnic groups have regularly participated in the show, presenting their fashion styles, linguistic traits, and musical trends. By analyzing conversational narratives of fourteen ethnic contestants from Season 1 to 3, Huang et al. (2015) identified seven themes: music, dream, family, love, hometown, challenge, and honor. They further contend that specific narratives such as music and hometown can evoke nationalist sentiments due to their indications of diversified cultures and broad territory. Thus, by showing those conversations through nationally broadcast television, the peripheral ethnic music was incorporated in the core domain. This argument was further supported by the ethnic contestants’ strategy to incorporate the musical ethnicity into the national and even international musical scene. Such demonstration, on the one hand, helps minimize the prejudicial belief that minority ethnic culture is backward, primitive, and isolated. On the other hand, it proves that non-Han contestants are capable of performing a wide range of musical genres and are even more
advantageous because their dual identities can evoke different musical understandings. Among all minority contestants in the show, the following paragraphs highlight three individuals who achieved the musical excellence and have established their professional reputations by outstanding performances in the show and subsequently on different national and international stages: the Yi minority representative Jike Junyi who won the third place in the first season, the Uyghur Perhat Khaliq, the runner-up in Season 3, and the Tibetan Tashi Phuntsok, winner of the second season of *Sing! China*.

Jike has been so far the most commercially successful non-Han performer from the show. In the blind audition, she impressed all judges by a remix of a Yi *yuanshengtai* folk song, “Ap Jie Lop” (2008) and American singer James Brown’s “I Feel Good” (1964). In the beginning of the performance, she interpreted the ethnic song that contains frequent wide intervals and a slow-paced melody with a good control of her voice and deep emotional expressions. Then she quickly transitioned to a funky style, moving her body with the groove and producing powerful vocals. Her performance immediately provoked fierce competition among the four judges who desperately wanted to have her on their teams. Eventually, she chose Liu Huan as the coach, which was a smart choice given Liu himself has been actively engaging in the promotion of ethnic music. With Liu’s help, Jike became a shining star on the stage, alternately performing songs in Chinese, English, and Yi languages. In the finale, on the eve of Chinese national holiday, Liu specifically arranged for her an orthodox-style ethnic song “Qingshenyichang” (1964), a

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39 “Ap Jie Lop” was composed by Yi singer-songwriter Moxi Zishi in 2008. The song was written in the Yi language and expresses the Yi people’s optimism in the face of hardship.
song that eulogizes the brotherhood between Yi minority and the Red Army in the civil war. The lyrics contain strong indications of national solidarity and revolutionary spirit, such as “Red army soldiers are our brothers” and “Revolutionary flowers blossom in our hearts.” In 2017, Jike was invited to perform this song in CCTV’s Spring Gala on one of the stages set up in her hometown, the center of Yi population. Her performances on different national stages on the special days not only intended to evoke a nationalist sentiment among audiences but also confirmed her capability of exerting significant influences on the Han-dominated society by performing her ethnicity.

The unique vocal quality and performing style, the passionate and wild nature inherited from the ethnic culture, and the ability to sing in different languages became the very reasons why Jike would shine in The Voice of China and other bigger stages (Chen, 2014). In fact, her musical career after the show became increasingly thriving. She won a few national singing awards, released two albums and several singles, held solo concerts, was invited to participate in a few well-received music reality shows, and even secured characters in different movies. Her career has also been extended to the international business. She cooperated with the American hip-hop legend Snoop Dogg in her single “Summer Time” (2014) and took a role in the action movie Outcast (2014), starring Mei as the wife of the character played by Nicolas Cage (Wei, 2013). For Jike, her achievement suggests a personal growth from an ethnic singer to a national star, while for the nation, her voice and performances add up to the diversity of the national cultural landscape.
Unlike Jike, the Uyghur rocker Perhat Khaliq took a different path on his musical journey after he gained enormous fame from the show. Instead of following a routine commercial mode, he chose to stay close to his ethnic roots and maintain his authenticity. He told Channel NewsAsia that Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, was his favorite place; his roots and the source of his art were there (Martin, 2016). As a self-taught musician, he grew up listening to Bob Dylan and has been fascinated with the Western rock. His music thus interprets traditional Uyghur culture with the fusion of Western musical elements. Prior to The Voice of China, Perhat played music with his band Qetiq at local bars in Urumqi. When he was singing one of his signature songs “Dolan Muqam,” a variation on the rhythmic folk songs in Uyghur culture, journalist Levenworth (2015) described the performance this way:

he starts the song slowly, with his gravely voice projecting the opening lines, “Allah! Shall the name of a man with good deeds ever die down?” Then, halfway through the song, the band kicks in and jacks up the tempo, with Perhat singing lyrics that examine the “unbearable pain of love” and a yearning for peace and safety.

Such a description aptly corresponds to Perhat’s performance of a Mandarin song in the blind audition of The Voice of China when he presented the powerful vocals and emotionally charged performances. In his after-show tours, the Uyghur ethnomusicologist and filmmaker Mukaddas Mijit expressed her surprise when she saw audiences crying out for Perhat’s music in Mandarin-speaking cities not because of the exoticism of the music but because of the power in his performances. Mijit further commented that his music represented something powerful, true and simple that the Chinese audiences were looking for (Martin, 2016). Besides national tours, Perhat has also been present in several international musical festivals in Asia and Europe. His
achievements on both national and international stages helped him receive the Prince Claus Award from the ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to China. The award spoke highly of his contributions to bring freshness to Chinese music scene and his ability to share real emotions and to discover musical traditions (Prince Claus Fund, 2016). In the face of the existing political tensions between the Han society and the minorities in Xinjiang, Perhat’s music functions as the cultural mediator to bridge the gaps and his unique voice has definitely enriched and extended the scope of Chinese musical scene.

Following Jike and Perhat’s paths, the victory of the Tibetan teacher Tashi Phuntsok represents the highest national honor for minority ethnic singers in China’s popular musical scene. In the blind audition, Tashi first impressed all judges with his adapted version of a slow-paced and emotion-saturated popular song “Yimianhushui” (1991) in both Chinese and Tibetan. Though facing against the stage, judges immediately identified the singing style, a style when Tibetan singers utter the high wavering tones at the end of a line. In the second half of the performance, he suddenly started rapping in Tibetan, making crispy delivery and powerful vocals. Such delicate mastery of different and complicated singing techniques astonished all judges, who kept saying that his singing style was unheard of and his musical talent was incomparable. The reason for such reaction is the continuing lack of accurate representation of Tibet in the contemporary Han-dominated society. Thus, the modern Tibetan music is still unknown to the large population in China. Tashi’s subsequent musical journey in the show, however, not only continuously surprised the judges, contestants, and the on-site audiences, but also kept presenting
the authenticity of the modern Tibetan music that “brings together the foreign and the familiar, the modern and the traditional, and effectively challenge the usefulness of those categories” (Diehl, 2004, p. 9). Having Liu Huan as his coach, Tashi was able to enhance his performances to a higher level due to Liu’s expertise in ethnic music. In one of the after-show interviews, Tashi talked about how Liu helped him incorporate Tibetan musical elements such as Tibetan opera technique and Tibetan singing bowls into the performances. He recalled one of Liu’s touching remarks that China has fifty-six ethnic groups and the Chinese music should have room for each ethnic musical style (Zhang, 2017).

Jike, Perhat, and Tashi’s presences in the nationally broadcast singing competition show are not only the positive reflection of the inducement policy implemented decades ago, but also the evidence to show that minoritized individuals are making new voices in the national public sphere and are actively participating in the public representation of their ethnic identity (Baranovitch, 2003). Their achievements further indicate the central government’s determination to celebrate cultural diversity, to promote cultural communication, and to maintain the national solidarity. For audiences, being exposed to music of ethnically dissimilar styles and distinctive languages allows them to extend their imagination of national music so that they can appreciate them as national and as “mine/ours” (Tuohy, 2001)

**Conclusion**

Chinese nationalism is a complicated and multifaceted discourse that keeps evolving with the change of social, political, and cultural conditions along the historical lines. From the musical
perspective, as I have discussed in this chapter, scholars have provided abundant examples to show how the abstract concepts of national identity, unity, and solidarity have been concretized through a soundtrack that permeated the daily life of every broadly defined Chinese individuals. These examples have been recreated, reorganized and interrelated in diverse settings, working together to define the temporal and spatial dimensions of the nation (Tuohy, 2001).

In conversations with the existing literature, I have explored the different layers of nationalism represented in the televised singing competition show *The Voice of China* and the rebranded *Sing! China* in order to perceive its most current form in Chinese society. In a more specific way, I have examined how individual and collective performances of two different versions of “I Love You, China” in and out of the show intended to express the patriotic sentiments and how such intention was both appreciated and challenged by Chinese audiences. The performances of these two songs by foreign individuals on different stages further complicated the understanding of nationalism in the Chinese context. Besides the sonic representations, I have also identified two nationalist rhetorical themes—the Chinese Dream and root-seeking that have been repeatedly accentuated by the host, judges, and contestants in the show. These two themes function as powerful rhetorical strategies to reinforce the CCP’s ideology of promoting a powerful and unified China and maintaining its cultural relations with the rest of the world. The analysis of the ethnic performances continues to specify the configuration of Chinese nationalism. The presence and the achievements of ethnic minority singers not only indicate their growing agency to perform ethnicity and authenticity but also
suggest their contributions to the construction of the national identity. This is greatly due to a changed attitude of the CCP toward ethnic groups that features leniency and inclusion in the contemporary time.

My discussions of sonic representations, nationalist rhetoric, and ethnic performances are by no means able to cover every aspect of Chinese nationalism, but such an effort, hopefully, can present some new evidences to show how Chinese people articulate and negotiate their identities in the musical scene, especially in an era when the central government, led by the CCP, keeps reinforcing the official ideology to build a strong and unified power in a refined and subtle but emotionally compelling way (Guo, 2004). Under the new political scheme, the whole society appears to be experiencing something different but irony persists. For example, even though overseas contestants make great efforts to pledge allegiance to their motherland, they hardly have a shot to win the show due to a hidden rule that the voice of China should only be represented by someone who is both politically and culturally Chinese. This explains why in the first season of Sing! China, Singaporean singer Nathan Hartono mysteriously lost his votes to his Chinese opponent in the finale. The political intention is clear here: the realization of a unified and strong China depends on the communal efforts made by every ethnic Chinese individual home and abroad but it is only the legitimate Chinese citizens who are the real agent in the cause and who can enjoy the benefits generated along the way.

Additionally, the achievements minority ethnic groups have made in the show suggest their inclusion in the discourse of the nationalism but their voices are still not loud enough to overturn
the long-lasting stereotypes and misrepresentation towards them. Contestants such as Jike, Perhat, and Tashi have beautifully displayed their unique ethnic culture on the national stage and have outperformed their Han counterpart but they only represent a few out of fifty-five minority ethnic groups in the country. That said, the show still conveys a positivity that more diversified voices are made and newer messages are transmitted by these voices. The following chapter seeks to explore the relationship between the gendered bodies and voices both in the show and in the larger society.
CHAPTER IV. FICTIVE KINSHIP, MUSIC PLAYING, AND ANDROGYNY: THE 
PERFORMANCE OF GENDER AND GENDER ROLES

On July 24, 2015, The Voice of China Season 4 presented a jaw-dropping performance as the blind audition turned into a double-blind twist. The contestant Lin Yan performed “Don’t Pester Me” (Bielai Jiuchan Wo), a signature rock song composed by one of the Chinese pioneer rockers Dou Wei in the early 1990s. The song vents anger, disappointment, and disgust to an imaginary “you.” Lin’s masculine, deep and husky voice expressed power and determination with the shouting of the lyrics such as “I don’t want to talk to you and I am very angry” and “Stop pestering me and don’t make me sad.” The powerful vocal helped Lin win the votes of judges Wang Feng and Na Ying. However, as their chairs turned around, Wang and Na were confused, seeing only a curtain hanging on the stage that completely concealed the contestant. When the contestant’s identity was finally revealed, all the judges nearly fell off their chairs because they were told that the manly voice came from a 39-year-old stay-at-home mom. Judge Harlem Yu came to realize why he heard a refinement in the rugged performance, while judge Jay Chou asked the studio audience if they had guessed the contestant was, in fact, a female: the answer was a resounding no.

As the curtain fell off, Lin was seen wearing a black leather vest on top of a red graphic T-shirt, a pair of light-blue denim jeans, and a pair of short brown leather boots. Her hair was done in dreadlocks and swept back in a ponytail. Although the way she dressed was masculine, her face, standing posture, and delivery style still revealed a feminine softness. Still in doubt, judges
wondered how a rock song performed by such a powerful and masculine voice came out of a female body. Thus, they asked Lin to sing a few lines of each judge’s signature song. Once again, judges dropped their jaws by hearing their own songs coming out of a body that did not match the gendered voice. As Lin continued to tell the story about how she fell in love with rock music when she realized her voice was different and how the unique voice affected her as a woman and as a mother, she demystified both the problems and benefits brought by the ostensible mismatch of the body and the voice. Lin’s performance and her story were unique in three ways. First, the masculine voice emanating from her female body not only enabled her to express masculine power and female refinement at the same time but also disrupted the normative perception of gender and body in Chinese society. Second, the exposure of her identity challenged the stereotypical images of a mother and a rocker because the combination of the two in one body is seemingly impossible. Third, instead of relying on the anticipated effect created by the mismatch of the voice and body, Lin showed professionalism, authenticity, and powerfulness like any decent rock performance. While Lin was one of a few female contestants who performed with a manly vocal sound in the show, there have also been multiple male contestants who sang with a feminine voice. Thus, it is interesting and important to examine how the show has served as a venue to present the performance of a gendered body and voice and how gender roles are represented and challenged on the stage and relevant in the larger society.

In this chapter, I first provide a genealogical understanding of gender and gender roles in the Chinese music scene in order to perceive how the concept of gender has involved in Chinese
society, and how gender roles have been disrupted and reestablished at different historical moments. With this theoretical background, I examine how traditional Chinese gender roles, constructed within the framework of family lineage, are still prevalent and important in defining modern gender relations. Next, I explore how gender roles are represented in music making and performing, and how the performances of androgyny change, defy, and even intermittently challenge gendered social norms in Chinese society (Fung, 2013). Finally, I conclude with the argument that compared to the early waves of singing competitions shows in the 2000s, there has recently been a loosening of the central government’s grip on gender representation, as well as a growing social leniency so that more gender-diversified voices are heard in the show and accepted in the society.

**The Genealogy of Gender and Gender Roles in the Chinese Music Scene**

Due to its important role in the construction and articulation of identities, Harris and Rowan (2013) point out that music is a particularly rich field for the analysis of gender. As Western concepts of gender keep evolving, especially with Judith Butler’s influential interpretation, gender is understood as a constructed identity and a performative accomplishment (Butler, 1990). Thus, the traditional gender norm that consists of male and female in a heterosexual framework has been severely interrogated and challenged in both academic and popular discourses. In an ethnographic study of the singing practices of different Albanian groups, ethnomusicologist Jane Sugarman (1997) questions most studies of music and gender that “have participated in a reinscription of binary notions of gender” (p. 32). She suggests that as the world
is encountering a global proliferation of gendered and engendering discourse and practices, it is necessary to learn how individuals and communities incorporate, resist, or reformulate these discourses and practices through musical means, at times interrogating the concept of gender itself.

In the Chinese context, the traditional understanding of gender, according to Barlow (1994), differs from the Western perspective in which womanhood is produced in relation to a man’s heterosexual desire. Gender, in traditional Chinese society, is formed within the framework of the jia—a lineage unit or a family. Thus, the dichotomy of mother-father, wife-husband, brother-sister, etc. outweighs that of male-female. In explaining gender relations, Song (2004) introduces the Yin-Yang principle, a fundamental concept in Chinese philosophy that originated from Chinese cosmology. The image of Yin and Yang, constructed as black and white, indicates that there is no absolute borderline between them and inside Yang, there exists Yin energy, in the form of a white dot, and vice versa. The image as a whole represents an ultimate unified being, while Yin and Yang, inseparable from each other, are in an eternal state of flux to balance the changing unity. Thus, the Yin-Yang duality, instead of presenting an oppositional and exclusive binary, describes the complementarity, interconnection, and interdependence of seemingly opposite forces in the natural order. Song further contends that the Yin-Yang principle is not restricted to the sexual connotations of male and female but covers “a much wider and different symbolic field” (p. 15). Thus, its wider connotations and fluidity in the social hierarchy make it “a fundamental paradigm to read Chinese gender discourse” (p. 15).
The traditional view of gender in Chinese society, however, was fundamentally disassembled by the arrival of the imperialist canons and the nationalist anxieties of the second half of the nineteenth century. The colonialist concept of gender binaries was introduced in Chinese society as part of a maneuver to construct a new and modern China (Zheng, 1999). Music-related art form became one of the cultural fields affected by the Western aesthetics and the binary gender ideology. For example, traditional Peking opera started to adapt the artistic merits of Western opera repertoire that differentiated the musical characteristic for female and male role types in terms of voice range, register, and melodic styles. In the performing arts, Zheng (1999) observes a combined force of the traditional Chinese gender ideology that emphasizes the reconciliation and the Western binary gender standard that highlights the confrontation of different genders in various musical compositions.

The co-existence of traditional gender ideology and the imported gender binary, along with the political struggles, economic reforms, social changes, and the introduction of new waves of Western ideology, keeps transforming the understanding of gender in Chinese society. The Chinese music scene becomes a natural site to reflect these transformations. Traditional Chinese Opera,⁴⁰ for example, is a fertile ground for the analysis of gender roles and gender transformations (Harris & Rowan, 2013). According to Li (2003), Chinese theatre first matured in Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) during which female players were favored and female cross-

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⁴⁰ Traditional Chinese opera is a popular form of drama and musical theatre dating back to ancient China. It is an umbrella term that consists of numerous regional branches. Peking opera, or Beijing opera, is the most renowned form and has become the national opera in modern China. There are also other popular branches such as Kunqu Opera, Yue Opera, Sichuan Opera, Cantonese opera, etc.
dressing dominated. In the subsequent Ming (1638-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) periods, women were confined to private performance scenes, while the public stages were appropriated and monopolized by men. In the early Republican period (1912-1949), female performers made a powerful return to the public stages and Yue opera later evolved into a theater dominated by all-female troupes (Jiang, 2009). The shift of gender roles and cross-dressing in the operatic practices in history not only generates “the subversive notion of gender as performance, and thereby disrupted the stable order of binary gender” (Li, 2003, p. 6), but also renders Chinese theatrical space “an unstable site of ideological contestation subsuming a simultaneous perpetuation and dismantling of bipolar gender notions and social-political hierarchies” (p. 7).

Gender ideology in modern China, according to Yang (1999), is a fragile formation, overshadowed by and intertwined with the project of nation building. As a concrete form of Chinese feminism, the women’s movements in the early twentieth-century were closely tied with the nationalist movements resisting Western and Japanese imperialism. Women in musical works were depicted as being victimized and subservient in the face of national salvation. New female subjectivity featuring a soft voice and melismatic melodies with delicate ornamentation appeared in narrative and sorrowful vocal music (Zheng, 1999). Amid these passive images, there were also a few songs empowering women through the revival of ancient female warriors by reincarnating their traditional ethic of subservience into the heroic nationalistic spirit (Zheng, 1997). After the foundation of the PRC in 1949, as observed by Yang (1999), Chinese feminism became a “state feminism” administered by the CCP. In Maoist China, women were educated to
believe that they could do whatever men could, including working, dressing, and behaving. Women’s softness and feminine beauty were discouraged and suppressed, and instead, physical power and masculinity were propagated as new norms in the socialist construction. Thus, gender became a neutralized category for women. In the process of gender erasure, the socialist state exerted power to displace the traditional gender norms and to directly administer women’s productivity in the public space, thus transforming them into loyal state subjects. Since the dominant political ideology was to promote revolutionary socialist ideal, art forms including music, featured both the glorification of Mao and the CCP and the call for the class struggles during this period. Women, thus, were either depicted as asexualized laborers or relegated to a subservient social status.

In the reform era, the market economy allowed women to rebuild their feminine beauty and to pursue what once being criticized as bourgeois and counterrevolutionary (Baranovitch, 2003), such as wearing makeup, dressing up, and openly talking about love. With the introduction of the popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan in the early 1980s, love songs quickly won popularity. A legendary diva from Taiwan, Teresa Teng, became an iconic figure not just because her sweet image symbolized the ideal Chinese womanhood (Shiau, 2009), but also because her soft voice, romantic lyrics, and the performance of poetic ballads re-ignited the longing for love among Chinese Mainland audiences. Thus, Teng’s music became a site where youths experimented with the newly exposed concepts of romance and femininity, and Teng’s soft femininity became the model for young Chinese women to imitate (Ta, 2009). As popular music
evolves and thrives in the post-reform era, it continues to reflect the changing views on gender roles in Chinese society. Analyzing 473 songs from two Chinese music charts from 1993 to 2012, Zhu and Ke (2013) found that more than seventy percent of these songs are about love and romantic relationships. Within this thematic category, while women are still stereotypically depicted in the male gaze, passively waiting for love, easily being hurt, and becoming a playgirl, there are also independent and powerful women who are aggressive and resolute in relationships. In contrast, Zhu and Ke also point out that while men are portrayed as being responsible, strong, and having the initiative, they also show weakness, passivity, sentimentality, and irrationality in the face of love.

In fact, the study of men as a gendered category in China has lagged far behind compared to the study of women. Amid the limited literature, scholars mainly focus on two themes: 1) the constructions of masculinity in indigenous Chinese culture, and 2) a perceived crisis of masculinity in modern China. For the former, Louie (2002) employs the dyad of wen-wu (cultural attainment-martial valor) to conceptualize Chinese masculinity. According to him, wen masculinity is exemplified by Confucius, the sage of the gentleman-scholar type, whereas wu is represented by the legendary general Guan Yu and the literary bandit heroes. The highest ideal of Chinese masculinity is to demonstrate the balance of wen and wu. Song (2004) analyzes the constitution of the fragile scholar in the masculinity of elite men in literary and classical sources, arguing that Chinese masculinity, different from the Western heteronormative gender construct, is power-based rather than sex-based. This argument is in line with scholarly conversations about
Chinese femininity, which offers an alternative approach to perceive gender and gender roles in Chinese society. In elaborating the second theme, scholars relate the crisis of masculinity to the breakdown of the Confucian order in the face of the Western powers at the turn of the twentieth century that caused the semi-colonization of the Chinese nation, thus the emasculation of Chinese men (Zhong, 2000). In Mao’s China, men were further suppressed by socialist gender construction due to the state’s call to devote and sacrifice. Their personal ambitions were dampened and some became timid and obedient, leading to the symbolic castration of their manhood (Yang, 1999). In the post-Mao era, women’s liberation was premised on the reduction of men’s economic power, and such reduction both deteriorated men’s social status and impaired their manhood by forcing them to be obedient and loyal to the authoritarian party-state (Song, 2010; Zhong, 2000). Thus a strong quest for masculinity burst in the reform era, with Chinese rock music emerged as one of the first wave of art forms to represent masculine power, rebellion, freedom, and truthfulness. The godfather of Chinese rock, Cui Jian, along with other rockers employed music to declare their breakup with the traditional values such as self-restraint, obedience, suppression of individuality and sexual desires, values that used to be celebrated under the Confucian order and are still in prevailing Communist governance (Baranovitch, 2003).

Due to a set of changing scenarios such as the rise of nationalism, the intensification of consumerism, the ongoing influence of the men’s movement in the West, and the redistribution of wealth and power in contemporary China, diversified transformations in masculinity have taken place in the society (Song, 2010). Jankowiak and Li (2014) have observed a decline of
chauvinistic masculinity and a rise of a newer form that features confidence, politeness, a cool
demeanor and a heightened respect for females. Similarly, Baranovitch (2003) has noticed a
return of the traditional type of soft and delicate manhood in Chinese music scene since the mid-
1990 whereas the macho type has lost much of its past appeal. There are also other types of
masculinity such as stern and sophisticated, vigorous and sunny, trendy and cool, sensual and
sexy, and androgynous (Shaw & Tan, 2014). These aesthetic changes towards male images attest
to the fact that Chinese masculinity is a constructed discourse that features fluidity, hybridity,
and pluralism and the comprehension of it is closely tied to the larger historical and social
surroundings. The fact is equally true to the aforementioned Chinese femininity and other non-
normative gender identities.

Non-normative gender identity, or a gendered conception beyond femininity and
masculinity, is an underexplored topic in the Chinese music scene. Scholarly discussions mainly
start from cross-dressing practices in Chinese theater. Li (2003) provides a critical queer reading
of adapted versions of the classic *Butterfly Lovers* to disentangle the gender ambiguities in the
traditional story and to examine how the story becomes a collective memory and gay myth for
Chinese homosexuals. Martin (2003) explores how female homosexuality is articulated in
Taiwanese singer-songwriter Sandee Chan’s music and how her songs become a space for
lesbian fan community to make voices in contemporary Mandarin pop music scene.

Drawing from gender-based field studies, Finnish ethnomusicologist Pirkko Moisala (1999)
conceptualizes “musical gender” to investigate how music serves as a specific site and context
for gender performance. Moisala argues that music as an essential part of theatre creates freer and wider gender performativity because the performing stage allows and magnifies a wide range of gender-related performances that are restricted or downplayed in the conventional social context. Inspired by Moisala, I consider the stage of *The Voice of China* as the specific site on which gender-related narratives are explored. In particular, I focus on how gender roles are performed both via familial relationships and in the music making and performing, and how androgynous bodies and voices are represented both in the show and in the larger social context. Such an effort is to demonstrate that gender ideology needs to be reexamined and reevaluated in contemporary Chinese music scene as well as in the larger society.

**Performing Gender Roles via Fictive Kinship**

As one of the two perceptions of gender in Chinese society, the traditional view defines men and women in the framework of family lineage. Under this doctrine, men, born with a higher status, were responsible for continuing the family bloodline, while womanhood was achieved within the boundaries of ethical-practical kin relations such as her role as a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a mother. Thus men played a dominant role in a family, while women were subservient to men in different life stages, such as to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to the oldest son if the husband died. Barlow (1994) employs the Yin-Yang dyad to differentiate the traditional view of gender from the essentialist Western gender binary and proposes that what appears as “gender” in pre-modern Chinese society are not anatomical women and men, but differentiated positions produced by Yin and Yang, that is, a profusion of
hierarchical and relational subjectivities. Similarly, Song (2004) describes the absence of
male/female dichotomy as one of the defining features of pre-modern Chinese gender discourse.
To him, the Yin-Yang principle that demonstrates the fluidity of gender identity can facilitate
interpretation of the sexual differences in Chinese culture. Despite the changed power dynamics
in gender discourse in modern China, the relationship between men and women are still
frequently viewed through formal or fictive kinship.

Anthropologists and sociologists use “fictive kinship” to describe a type of social
relationship that is based not on blood or marriage but rather on other close ties. This type of
kinship can replicate many of the rights and obligations usually associated with family ties
society to describe the personal relationship that is intended to encompass various categories of
human social relations including the formal and the fictive kinship. In the production of
relatedness, gender is naturally embedded in a wide variety of heterosexual kinship titles. For
example, gege and didi refer to the older and younger brothers respectively, while jiejie and
meimei refer to the older and younger sister. Shushu (uncle) is used to address the male siblings
of one’s parents, while ayi (aunt) is for the female equivalent. For the grandparents’ generation,
the male is addressed as yeye (grandpa) whereas the female is nainai (grandma). Outside the
family, these titles are also commonly used to address those with superior age or seniority,
indicating an age-based and gender-based relatedness. In The Voice of China, judges and
contestants have frequently used these kinship titles in their conversations to form relatedness,
during which their gender roles are articulated and negotiated. The following paragraphs illustrate two major kinship-based gender roles visible in the show through the first season to the newly concluded one.

First, brotherhood and sisterhood are formed among judges and contestants. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the female singer Na Ying is the only full-season recurring judge who had an excellent track record of producing winners in the show—three champions in six seasons. Also due to her reputation in the industry, all judges addressed her as “Na Jie” even if she was not always the oldest in all seasons. With such title, Na seemed to be accorded more power and freedom in initiating ideas, topics, and decisions in the conversations (Chen & Chung, 2002). When fighting for any intended contestants, she often took the initiatives by either uttering her winning stories in the past seasons or playing her gender and seniority card. She repeatedly highlighted her identity as the sole female judge who could understand feminine refinement better and who could provide a uniquely female perspective that was unavailable to the male judges.

Another of Na’s signature strategies to guarantee her winning of contestants was to form a sister-brother alliance with Jay Chou, who joined in the coaching panel in Season 4. United as family members, the two always recommended each other in the blind auditions as the most suitable coach by offering additional benefits to the contestants. These benefits may only be achieved by the other’s gender advantage or unique musical expertise. Their alliance clearly exemplifies the Yin-Yang dyad that tends to emphasize the complementarity and interdependence
in gender relations. However, when both wanted the same contestant, the brother-sister alliance collapsed immediately. Although such an alliance was nothing but a gimmick to produce drama for ratings, it reflects a fact that a familial relationship that bonds them in an age-and-gender-based hierarchical ranking rather than a heterosexual romantic relationship was the defining factor to understand the gender roles among judges.

Unlike the pre-modern view on gender role in which women were in a completely subservient and dependent position, Na seems as powerful as, if not more than, any male judges on the coaching panel. Na’s empowerment coming from her aggressive personality, her gender privilege in the show, and her seniority in the music industry, however, has incurred massive criticisms in Chinese social media. A hashtag topic “#Na Ying Get out of The Voice of China#” in one of the most powerful trends on the social media websites SinaWeibo; it has initiated more than 23,000 discussions and attracted more than 7.6 million readerships.41 Under this pressure, Na officially announced her departure from the show in a statement issued on Weibo on October 11, 2017. She explained the reason for her leaving as mental and physical exhaustion because of every choice she had to make under the brutal competition system.42 This reflects an unfortunate fact that though a woman may no longer be subordinated to men in contemporary Chinese society, she is still subjugated to questions and challenges when powerful at work. Na’s proposal

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41 See the discussions in Chinese at https://weibo.com/p/100803a7387130803cf101d30263967c35b06%e9%82%a3%e8%b1%e6%bb%9a%e5%87%b
42 See the article “Na Ying quits as Sing! China mentor amid talk that the show may be rigged” published by The Straits Times on October 12, 2017. It can be accessed at http://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/entertainment/na-ying-quits-as-sing-china-mentor-amid-talk-that-the-show-may-be-rigged
to form the sister-brother alliance may also reflect her lack of confidence in the face of the other male judges. The brotherhood and sisterhood, after all, is nothing but a continuation of women’s subservience to men.

The brotherhood, sisterhood, and other familial kinship ties were also observed among contestants. As survivors from the blind auditions, contestants join their respective judge’s team and receive musical training before the battle rounds. Among these teams, the oldest male often takes the leadership. For example, in Season 3, the Uyghur contestant Perhat was called “Perhat shu” by other members in Wang Feng’s team due to his age and his seniority in the musical practices. Thus Perhat was seen as the leader to help younger contestants. Other male contestants were also frequently addressed as gege by their teammates throughout different seasons. In contrast, there are substantial absences of female contestants who are willing to be addressed as jiejie, nor are there any who want to take the leadership. The 33-year-old female Chinese Canadian singer Zizi in Sing! China Season 2 openly talked about how she felt uncomfortable being called “Zizi jiejie” because the title suggests her old age. Thus, the use of the honorific titles to male and female confirms the double standard in gender roles since calling a man gege or shushu means respect and the acknowledgment of his seniority, whereas calling a woman jiejie can mean disrespect and insult. Women are not willing to be called jiejie because the title suggests that they are old, useless, and unwanted in the male gaze. Their unwillingness also reflects their subservient past during which they can only rely on their father, husband, and son. When Na Ying was addressed as “Na jie,” she also repeatedly refuted it by asking “am I that
old”? in different scenarios. The unequal gender role is further supported by one of Zhao and Jones’s (2017) findings that Chinese women are not willing to be identified as the leader among many other identities probably due to the fact that the leader identity disrupts the traditional ideas of femininities. Thus, it can be seen that the conventional gender norms have set invisible chains upon women. The alliances of brotherhood and sisterhood in the show put female contestants into a more passive positionality.

The parent-child relationship between judges and contestants is the second important kinship-based gender role visible and influential in the show. Among all nine judges who have attended the show in different seasons, Na, Liu, Yu, and Chin were born in the 1960s, while Wang, Yang, Chou, Chan, and A-Mei were born in the 1970s. All but Yang and A-Mei are married and have children. Thus, when these judges face younger contestants, it is natural that they tend to identify themselves as parents who want to establish an immediate relatedness to. This is also to convey the message that they know how to get along with younger generations. In Sing! China Season 2, when fighting for the 18-year-old high school student Curley Gao, Na welcomed her to join in the team of “Na Ying ayi” and promised Gao that she can play with her children. Gao eventually chose Na because her mother was a huge fan of Na and she grew up listening to Na’s music. She chose Na as her coach not only for music’s sake but also to seek continued motherly bonding. In Gao’s later narration, Na indeed fulfilled her maternal responsibility as much as her role as a musical coach. Similarly, young contestants in other seasons also frequently compare Na to their own mother who gave them motherly warmth and
protection. These compliments to Na, however, have reinforced the gender role stereotype for women that are associated with nurturing, family-centeredness, and warmth. These stereotypes further explain why judges and the audiences dropped their jaws when rocker Lin Yan revealed her identity as a stay-at-home mother, as described at the beginning of this chapter. It appears that Lin not only disrupted the male-dominated rock music circle as a woman but also challenged the normative imagination of a mother.

When facing contestants who are parents, judges attempt to relate themselves to someone who understands the joy and hardship of raising children and someone who can offer both musical and child-rearing advice. In Season 3, when the 41-year-old single dad Zhu Ke devoted a song to his deceased wife and shared the story of how his own dad had to take care of his four-year-old daughter, rocker Wang Feng seemed to effectively manifest his emotionality and softness by relating to the contestant as a father who understood the importance of bonding with his daughter. Wang encouraged Zhu to keep performing music because he believed that music transmitted a father’s love to his daughter and to his beloved wife. The soft side of Wang was represented in sharp contrast with his regular tough and powerful rocker side but appeared to be telling and authentic to audiences. Similarly, in Season 1, when Liu Huan was told that the 23-year-old college graduate Xu Haixing had lost her father not long before and came to the stage to sing for his memory, Liu couldn’t help shedding tears on camera. He choked and explained that the young girl reminded him of his own daughter and he couldn’t imagine how painful it was for
the girl to never see her father again. It is from these constructed moving narratives that male judges seem to reveal their warm and soft sides. Judge Wang Feng was seen to demonstrate his caring and amiable gesture naturally and proudly as a father in contrast with his tough and wild image as a rocker. Jay Chou was represented both as the cool musician idol and the warm new father. Liu Huan seemed to display the calm and elegant scholar image, while Harlem Yu tended to show his versatility, vigorousness, and playfulness. Although these personalities are not necessarily related to gender roles, they suggest the heterogeneity of contemporary Chinese male images, their willingness to be exposed as a “family member,” and the society’s leniency towards a diversity of male images. For women, their images have changed substantially from pre-modern times, but the gender roles they have to play in the family and in the society still constrain them in a passive position. In the following section, I explore how musicians and performers of different genders contribute to music making and performing in the popular music industry.

Gender Roles in Popular Music Making and Performing

The creation of a Mandarin vocal genre called shidaiqu (song of the era) in the late 1920s not just lays the foundation for today’s Mandopop but also defines gender roles for the industry. Li Jinhui, the father of Chinese popular music, along with other male composers, were dedicated to the making of this new musical form—whereas its performers were exclusively female.

43 Sadly, Xu’s storytelling was later exposed as being arranged by the producers in order to angle for sympathy among the audiences. But the judge Li Huan was unaware of the scriptedness and shed tears for real emotion. See the report entitled “The Voice admits fakery: Arranging Xu Haixing to talk about her diseased father” at http://news.66wz.com/system/2012/08/10/103305195.shtml
Among them, the so-called Seven Great Singing Stars revolutionized the music industry with their distinctive singing voices and performing styles (Ho, 2016). This is in accordance with Chen’s (2005) observation that most of the recordings of popular songs from the early years were sung by women. As for male performers, they were rare and often served as the secondary characters in duets and choruses, or as vocalists for backing harmonies. The tradition of men composing and women singing has passed down to the contemporary popular music scene in which men write the lyrics and music, speaking in their own voices as well as that of women’s (Zheng, 1997). Thus, men have the power to decide what stories they want to tell and how they tell the stories, while women become voiceless and their images are always constructed from a male point of view. Although the recent years have seen an increasing number of female singers rise as songwriters, instrumentalists, and producers, women’s roles in the popular music scene are still restricted, passive, and insignificant. In contrast, men continue not only to dominate creative music making, but also to dominate the business side of the industry. The Voice of China confirms men’s monopoly and growing agency in the contemporary popular music industry and women’s continuing otherness, marginality, and lack of subjectivity (Baranovitch, 2003). But at the same time, it also displays a promising trend in which male and female contestants challenge the conventional gender roles in music performance.

The conventional gender norms that confine women’s role at home and men’s role at work is substantiated by the stories of established musicians in The Voice of China and Sing! China. As

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44 The seven singers include Bai Guang, Bai Hong, Gong Qiuxia, Li Xianglan, Wu Yingyin, Yao Lee and Zhou Xuan.
one of the two female judges, Na Ying rose to fame in the late 1990s and maintained a very active and successful career until 2006, when she chose to retreat to family life. Her choice seems personal, but attests to the long-standing tradition in China that women’s responsibility is at home and should return home no matter how successful she used to be in her career. A February 2016 article by the state news agency Xinhua writes, women returning home is not only beneficial to the growth of children and the stability of the family but also has a positive effect on the society. An August 2017 article in the government-controlled newspaper China Youth Daily says that women are more suitable to stay at home to take care of children.\(^4\) In this sense, the choice Na made may not just be personal at all. Rather, it comes from both the social tradition that puts pressure on women and the government that propagates the tradition. In both ways, gender discrimination was reinforced and the traditional gender roles women have to play continue to harass and jail them (Richardson, 2017). Luckily, Na came back to the public view two years later and restarted her musical career. But unlike her, there are many more female musicians who have chosen to return home at the cost of their established musical career. The other female judge A-Mei has had a long-lasting and active career since the late 1990s. Not getting married and having no children may be one of many factors contributing to her continuing success, but sadly, she has become a media target; media outlets describe her as a “leftover” woman of the highest rank in the entertainment industry who is incapable of finding

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\(^4\) These two articles are written as responses to the newly opened “Two children Policy”. See the February 2016 article entitled as “The two children policy makes more professional women return home” at http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-02/24/c_1118142363.htm and the August 2017 article entitled “Being a housewife is a valuable job” at http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2017-08-03/doc-ifyiswpt5013262.shtml
love and failing as a woman. Successful as she is, A-Mei is still a victim of conventional gender norms. The different career paths of Na and A-Mei suggest the dilemma women have to face in contemporary Chinese society.

In contrast, men, no matter what professions they are in, are able to invest more time and energy in their professional development than women. The gender role differentiation is well reflected in the popular saying of “nan zhu wai, nu zhu nei,” literally meaning that men take charge of things outside the family whereas women take care of things inside the family. If a man becomes a father, he continues to enjoy the freedom of pursuing his own career since low paternal involvement in a family is socially understandable and acceptable (Xia et al. 2015). When Jay Chou and Wang Feng openly talked about their newborn babies in the show, they expressed parental excitement and paternal love. But they never need to pause their musical career and make the sacrifice for their family. But from a different view, men are also subjugated by the gender norms because they are supposed to be the breadwinners of the family and have to give up family time more frequently.

There is also an obvious gender imbalance in the music industry and in musical versatility. Besides Na and A-Mei, eight female musicians have been invited as “dream coach” in different seasons, but the number is only half as many as the males. Among them, only Marvis Fan and

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46 Leffover women, or sheng nu, is a derogatory term in Chinese society that classifies women who remain unmarried in their late twenties and beyond. There are different titles given to those according to the age range. Women aged 35 and older are called “Great Sage Equal of Heaven” who are discriminated against the most. See more discussions in Fincher’s (2016) book. A-Mei was born in 1972 and definitely falls into the highest ranking. More reports can be found at [http://ent.chinadaily.com.cn/2017-04/21/content_29027093.htm](http://ent.chinadaily.com.cn/2017-04/21/content_29027093.htm) and [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/interface/yidian/1120781/2016-01-15/cd_23103416.html](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/interface/yidian/1120781/2016-01-15/cd_23103416.html)

47 A-Mei serves as the main coach in the second season of The Voice of China and came back as the dream coach in Jay Chou’s team in Season 4. So in total, only nine established female musicians have appeared in the show.
Tanya Chua are publicly identified as singer-songwriters and producers, while the rest of them are best known as vocalists who can dance, act, and perform one or two musical instruments. The fact that the invited dream coaches are from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the U.S. also reflects an absolute shortage of locally trained popular music artists in Mainland China. This is largely because the society does not provide a proper environment for females to develop their musical versatility. Yongsha Xie (2016) discusses the social unfriendliness towards female students in the college-level music education. She notices that female students outnumber the males in the enrollment but lose population quickly in the musical profession, whereas male students are small in number but take the lead in their subsequent professional development. The unfriendly social environment for women also partly explains why men keep playing the dominant role in the popular music industry. In the show, male judges such as Jay Chou, Wang Feng, Liu Huan, and Harlem Yu are renowned not just for their singing talent but also for their ability to write and produce musical pieces. The invited male coaches are even more diversified in terms of their musical abilities. Among them, there are songwriters, producers, vocalists, and instrumentalists who can play traditional Chinese, Western, and world musical instruments.

This gender imbalance is also projected on contestants. The simple fact that there are more male contestants than the females indicates men’s active roles on the stage and in the industry. Among the six champions in different seasons, there is only one female: Zhang Bichen. Her

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48 The headcount shows that there are more male contestants coming to the show in different seasons except for the newly concluded Sing! China Season 2 in which female contestants outnumbers the males for the first time. But total number of the male contestants is still larger than that of female.
victory in *The Voice of China* Season 2, according to an April 2017 article in *NetEase Entertainment*, is greatly accredited to her unique nasal vocality and her excellent mastery of singing skills such as the use of vibrato and the falsetto. Zhang’s win was well deserved since the show is looking for *the voice*. But this evaluation also reflects a reality in the contemporary Chinese popular music scene in which a female musician is always evaluated by her vocal and singing skills, whereas her other musical talents are often downplayed. An October 2015 article in *China Daily* speaks highly of Zhang’s ability to harness the power of being quiet when singing on the stage, which confirms the stereotypical images Baranovitch (2003) observes among Chinese female singers who “stand at the very end of the no-motion/dance continuum and seldom break away from this norm” (p. 145). Besides Zhang, the majority of female contestants come to the stage hoping to be acknowledged as they present their unique voices, but they fail to achieve as much as Zhang did. There are also some who can sing and play instruments, but they have never left any long-lasting impressions. In contrast, male winners have showcased musical versatility in different ways. For example, Liang Bo, Zhang Lei, and Jiang Dunhao have displayed their abilities to play guitars while performing with unique vocals. Li Qi and Tashi Phuntsok, with their superb mastery of voice and skill, have been lauded as being exceptionally talented (Davies, 2001). A simple background check of contestants also indicates that there are more males who self-identify as singer-songwriters and actively play instruments and perform band. With more musical versatility, male contestants keep enjoying more freedom and agency than female contestants.
Despite the reinforcement of conventional gender norms and the observed gender imbalance, there is a positive trend in music performing. In popular music discourse, the study of genre is often associated with the search for authenticity. Moore (2002) develops a tri-partite typology that highlights the role of the composers, listeners, and performers in music making and performing to understand the concept of authenticity. In this process, gender is an important identity in the construction of authenticity, the articulation of musical genres and the maintenance of genre boundaries (Hutcherson & Haenfler, 2010). In *The Voice of China*, contestants of different genders attempt to challenge and disrupt the authenticity by playing the music of a supposedly different gender.

With patterns or conventions of the behavior of different genders, music genres such as rock and rap are commonly considered male territory, whereas soft, romantic, and dance-oriented music style such as pop and blues are defined as being feminine (Christenson & Peterson, 1988). In the Chinese context, most music genres were born with a gendered quality. For example, since Chinese rock emerged in the late 1980s, its aesthetics have catered primarily to male-identified singers, leaving little room for females (de Kloet, 2010). The rock vocal style, characterized by harsh and abrasive timbre, is often accompanied by loud and rhythmically insistent music, whereas the lyrics, assertive and arrogant, are less significant than the shouting and screaming. Such performing style communicates well messages of masculinity (Frith & McRobbie, 1990). But when female vocalists perform this genre, their rasping rock vocals can be read as an articulation of female anger that poses a direct threat to the patriarchy (Leonard, 2007). When the
stay-at-home-mom Lin Yan performed “Don’t Pester Me,” her screaming male voice added a new layer of visceral expression of pain, rage, and frustration of the song. Such expression may also come from her dissatisfaction with how the society defines a woman’s role as a mother, how a female has to face the difficulty of being a rocker, and how her unconventional male voice brings trouble to her normal life. But her screams were not simply a performance of masculinity in drag (Leonard, 2007) because her feminine refinement was still noticeable, as judge Harlem Yu observed in Lin’s performance.

The conventionally soft and feminine genres such as Chinese Wind, campus folk, and love songs are also popularly performed by male contestants. Given that Mandopop men have a wide range of gender roles to select from (Moskowitz, 2010), their performances of these soft genres are acceptable and even highly appreciated in the society. In Season 4, the male college student Jiang Yuandong arranged a classical song “The East Wind Blowing Through My Small Lodge Again Last Night” (2010) into a piece of Chinese wind music. Jiang’s thick and mellow voice, skillful blending of chest and head voice, careful delivery of every single word, and emotional engagement elevated the performance to a new level of aesthetic enjoyment. In the second half of the song, Jiang added R&B elements with a stronger drumbeat and a quicker tempo. Such a change made the originally melancholy song even sadder and more desperate. In fact, fusing different music genres often receives applause and compliments on the stage because it signifies musical versatility and creativity. Genre transgressions, according to Hutcherson and Haenfler’s (2010) research may be upsetting to fans because the musical turn among different genres can
cause inauthenticity of the instrumentation and vocal delivery. But the performances in *The Voice of China* obviously tell different stories.

Ever since the emergence of Chinese popular music in the late 1920s, men and women have taken different roles in music making and performing. This is largely due to the social norms that confine them with different duties and responsibilities. Men are accorded more power and agency, while women play a subservient and passive role. The life stories of established musicians and the performances of the contestants in the show confirm the ongoing dominance of conventional gender roles in the music industry. But fortunately, there are also evidence to show that these roles are interrogated and challenged by emerging musicians of different genders. The next section explores how an even more unconventional phenomenon—the androgynous body and voice—disrupts and defies the gendered social norms.

**Performing Androgyny: Transgressed Bodies and Voices**

The etymology of “androgyny” traces back to the Greek roots “andro-” (male) and “-gyne” (female), referring to a combination of feminine and masculine traits (Woodhill & Samuels, 2004). In the Chinese context, Ames (1981) uses this word to visualize a Taoist consummate person who embraces and reconciles both masculinity and femininity in the pursuit of the ideal. The androgynous ideal in this understanding is an imaginary individual celebrated and desired in Taoist society. In Maoist China, the word is employed to propagate a new form of womanhood—“a kind of socialist androgyne” (Young, 1989, p. 236): genderless workers in public and chaste wives and selfless mothers at home. The more recent usage of the term is to describe a few
Canto-pop singers of the 1980s and 1990s such as Leslie Cheung, Anita Mui and Sammi Cheng who were renowned for their glamorous musical performances and ambiguous gender representations (Chan, 2010; Chan, 2015; Fung, 2009). But it was not until the sudden stardom of the 2005 Super Girl’s champion Li Yunchun that the notion of androgyny became widely circulated and extensively debated in Chinese society (Wang, 2008). Her boyish appearance, cool personality, and the preference to perform songs originally written for male singers eventually made her a symbol to challenge gender norms and cultural values of femininity (Fung, 2013).

The use of “androgyny” in various historical and social contexts not only reflects different understandings and attitudes towards the non-normative gender qualities and the corresponding gender roles initiated by the concept in Chinese society, but also suggests a “Chinese specificity” that both challenges Western universalism and emphasizes the importance of local theorizations in studying it (Li, 2015). In this regard, Li (2015) proposes to use the Chinese term zhongxing (neutral gender) to describe a cultural sensibility for its liminal status as a non-identity category and non-sexual practices heightened by contemporary Mandopop and Canto-pop singers. Li also lists some features of female zhongxing images such as flexibility regarding ideas of femininity and masculinity, tendency to minimize the traits of the secondary sexual characteristics, attempts to show male handsomeness, and adoption of masculine fashions, gestures, and facial expressions. Li’s conceptualization of zhongxing is not necessarily associated with an articulated LGBT identity, nor is it completely negated and abhorred in the society. For example, Li
Yunchun’s popularity in Mandopop and fashion industry as an iconic zhongxing persona in more recent years is widely celebrated as “a yearning for authenticity and individuality” (Wilkinson, 2017) and a continuing victory in liberating Chinese women from traditional gender role regulations. Li Yunchun’s growing success both as a star and as a zhongxing female reflects the society’s greater leniency towards the once distorted and demonized gender images. However, considering the exclusiveness of Li’s (2015) research on zhongxing females and the complexity of male images and other gender indicator such as the voice in this project, I use androgyny in the following paragraphs to describe a range of complex, ambiguous, and ambivalent non-normative examples of gender performativity.

The concept of androgynous male can denote both “flower men” and weiniang (fake woman) in Chinese society. The former refers to one type of metrosexual male who possesses aspects of soft masculinity such as a pretty face and gentle vocal tone, and takes care of their physical appearances in ways considered feminine (Yamakawa, 2014). This image, defying the hegemonic masculinity and disrupting the traditional male role model (Maliangkay, 2010), still falls into the range of masculinity and is in line with the traditional wen traits in the wen-wu dyad (Louie, 2012) in the Chinese context. The weiniang type of androgynous male further complicates the gender boundary by cross-dressing and behaving effeminately. Among these images, some are visible only in public for entertaining and commercial reasons, while others openly display their non-normative gender identifications and sexual orientations both in public and private life. Despite the conventional social norms that see the weiniang image as a health
problem and the state-promulgated rules that tend to prohibit *weiniang* personas in the mediated space, the *weiniang* community is still active online and offline, negotiating with and disturbing “the heteronormative diction of uniformity between socially accepted gender expressions and assigned gender roles” (Chao, 2017, p. 38)

In *The Voice of China*, both androgynous female and male images are commonly seen in different seasons. Androgynous female contestants display the masculine traits through their tomboy appearances and outfits as well as the stage manners and performing styles. In Season 4, a college sophomore Li Wenhui surprised the judges and the onsite audiences with her gender-ambiguous body and voice. Before Li’s gender identity was disclosed, she was seen with an oversized body and a boyish haircut, wearing a graphic black T-shirt under a blue motorcycle denim vest, a pair of oversized denim jeans and a pair of white sneakers, performing Coldplay’s *Yellow* (2000) in both English and Chinese. With a deep and thick voice, Li interpreted the alternative rock song in a slower and more melodic way. At the end of the performance, seeing Li on the stage, judge Na Ying couldn’t help asking the girl-or-boy question. When Li calmly and proudly said that she was a girl, the studio burst into shouting and scream because no one would have guessed the real fact by seeing her body and hearing her voice. Expecting the reaction, Li responded with a prepared confidence and optimism, saying, “I may not be a hot girl with long legs, but this is who I am.” Her defending statement effectively expressed her attitude towards the androgynous body, a body disrupting the normative imagination of a female image

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and representing an individualized and diversified interpretation of femininity. Not surprisingly, her androgynous image, along with her androgynous voice, incurs massive queries about her sexual orientation. Netizens even dug out her personal social media accounts to see if she was gay.⁵⁰ Those attempts, on the one hand, prove the prevailing orthodoxy towards female bodies in Chinese society, and on the other hand, suggest a growing curiosity to understand the new dimensions of gender qualities and gender roles.

If Li Wenhui showcased the extreme criticism androgynous female have to suffer, other androgynous female contestants in the show received positive feedback. In Season 2, Zhang Xingyi, coming to the stage with a tomboy image, presented a highly energetic performance of a rock and rap song *Super Explosion* (2011). She was seen moving her arms intensively, jumping around the stage, and both rapping and shouting the lyrics from her small body. At the end of the performance, when asked why she came to the stage, Zhang revealed her feminine side as a filial daughter who came to perform for her mother, to reassure the single parent that her daughter was able to take care of both herself and the mother. Zhang Xingyi’s tomboy appearance and vigorous performance enable her to express attributes and interests that feminine ideals may restrain such as competitiveness and strength (Rice, 2014), while her filial daughter image with soft and caring personality allowed her to be accepted and appreciated by the society regardless of her androgynous looks. Thus the combination of the seemingly paradoxical gender traits afforded Zhang more opportunities to quickly stand out among her female singer cohort. When

she released her new album in 2016, a March article in *Sina Entertainment* described her as someone who embodies both the male handsomeness and the female gracefulness and who is capable of performing both rock music and soft love songs.

The traditional gender roles embodied by a woman also allowed another androgynous female contestant Lin Yan to stay safe from the social criticism towards non-normative gender images. As described at the beginning of this chapter, Lin’s androgynous stage appearance and manly performing styles, along with her masculine vocal quality should have put her in the center of the massive criticism, but her role as a mother balanced the roughness and negativity conveyed by her manly image and voice. In her case, the double identity as a mother and a rocker becomes as intriguing as the conflict between her female body and male voice. In particular, when Lin revealed how she had to struggle to survive as a mother and a rocker with the mismatch of her body and voice, the narrative evoked emotions and sympathy among judges and audiences. This explains why she has been the only contestant safe from the gender controversy and why a woman’s family role is equally important to her gender role in the society.

Unlike androgynous female contestants who are both criticized and admired for their transgressed bodies and voices, multiple androgynous male personas have received almost unanimously negative criticisms because of their *weiniang*-look appearances and ambiguous sexual orientation. A nineteen-year-old college student Liu Zichen in Season 2 was questioned widely in the media about his skinny body type and soft looking face that makes him girlish and weak, the physical build that is desired by *weiniang* community (Chao, 2017). Also in Season 2,
a twenty-two-year-old college graduate Liang Junnuo stunned judges with his flamingo pink hair and heavy makeup. His peculiar fashion taste was easily related to that of weiniang and the gay community because the bright colors and flamboyant fashion styles are stereotypically associated with femininity or non-normative gender group. Putting aside sexual orientation, the visual representations of Liu and Liang—their appearances and dress styles—disempowered them both as men and as contestants in the show. Although they were lucky enough to be recruited to A-Mei’s team, neither made it far in the battle rounds. The extensive online criticisms questioning their looks also suggest that the society still holds stereotypes toward non-normative masculine images and there still exists intolerance and unfriendliness towards weiniang and the LGBTQ community. However, when Liu and Liang performed, both their vocal qualities and performing styles expressed masculine power and wildness. As such, their images may correspond to the physical features of weiniang, indicating feminine gender traits, but their voices still suggested the gender identity they were assigned at birth. This ambiguous and ambivalent fact further confirms Butler’s (1990) argument that gender is indeed a performed act. But in gender performativity, masculinity still seems to be highly valued over other gender traits.

Different from Liu and Liang who embody the weiniang traits in their physical appearance, quite a few male contestants came to the stage to show their androgynous voice. The most impressive one is Zhou Shen, in Season 3, who astonished judges and audiences with an

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51 See selected reports questioning Liu Zichen’s looks and sexual orientations at https://www.laonanren.com/news/2016-04/114263p8.htm; http://www.tianya999.com/vl/20130828090.html; Liang Nuojun was more questioned about his looks—if he had plastic surgery, for example—than his sexual orientation. But if a man has plastic surgery, it means he focused too much on the physical appearance, which makes him less masculine. See news examples at http://roll.sohu.com/20130812/n383978183.shtml; http://www.5011.net/mingxing/178380.html
indistinguishably female vocal quality featuring high pitch and soft timbre. Although Zhou’s musical journey stopped early in the show, his unique voice allowed him to achieve sudden stardom in the industry. With a short and small body and a child’s face, the then 22-year-old college student Zhou looked like a teenager rather than a man. Scholarship in cute studies tends to relate cuteness to infantile attractiveness. Lorenz (1971) contends that an innate release of mechanism of caring is easily triggered when babyish features such as protruding forehead, large eyes and round cheeks are seen. In this sense, Zhou’s androgyny has less to do with the gender transgression of his body than his underdeveloped gender traits caused by his youthful looks and small body shape, physical features that are always associated with naivety, innocence, and gentleness in East Asian culture (Chao, 2017). Moreover, Zhou’s transgressive voice added a new layer of confusion, producing a cherished and admired talent due to its distinctiveness and rareness. Without a masculine physical appearance, Zhou is still highly appreciated in his society. The famous Chinese songwriter and music producer Gao Xiaosong repetitively praised Zhou’s voice in his Weibo account as being a kind of magic that transcends the gender and time gap and touches people in every age range. Unlike the previously mentioned weiniang androgynous males who are rejected by the society, Zhou is frequently invited to perform in different televised programs, including one of the state-sponsored CCTV singing shows. In addition, Zhou also

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52 A post in Douban—a fan based discussion forum—summarizes all posts in Gao Xiaosong’s Weibo account and highlights Gao’s compliments towards Zhou Shen’s voice and performances in The Voice of China, including his guest performances in later seasons. Below the post are more responses from Douban community members who highly appreciate and admire Zhou’s voice. See the discussion panel at [https://www.douban.com/group/topic/107497704/?start=100](https://www.douban.com/group/topic/107497704/?start=100)

53 Zhou was invited as a guest performer in I am Going to Perform in the Spring Gala, a show dedicated to selected quality performances for the Spring Gala on the Chinese New Year Eve of 2018. Due to his extraordinary performance, Zhou was accorded a free pass to the next round as a guest performer, creating a surprise in the show that the producers have to stop
constantly wins the opportunities to sing theme songs for different dramas and films, which further allows him to be awarded a variety of prizes.\(^{54}\)

Zhou may be the most successful androgynous male to come from The Voice of China, but he is by no means the only person who challenged the conventional gender norms. Be it Li Wenhui and Lin Yan who performed a transgressed bodies and voices, or Zhang Xingyi who balanced her masculine appearances and her feminine values, or Liu Zichen and Liang Junnuo who presented the feminine traits in their bodies and fashion taste, or Zhou Shen who rose in the Chinese popular music scene with his unique voice, these androgynous individuals are actively engaging in the gender battles started by early androgynous heroes such as Li Yunchun. The acknowledgment and acceptance of some androgynous individuals by the society not only indicates the effective intervention of the conventional gender norms but also encourages more gender non-normative persons to join in the battle.

**Conclusion**

As the concept of gender, through the negotiation of both national and globalizing discourses, continues transforming in Chinese society, there is an urgent need to explore how its most contemporary form has been articulated, negotiated, and challenged both individually and collectively. The gender relations defined by the Confucian doctrine that sees men as superior and women as subordinate in Chinese society has gradually lost its power due to political recording. See the report at [http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/vneidi/2017-12-26/doc-ifypyuvc3659274.shtml](http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/vneidi/2017-12-26/doc-ifypyuvc3659274.shtml)

movements, economic reforms, and social changes in the discourse of globalization, but the social roles that confined men at work and women at home are still prevalent and powerful. To observe both the transformation and preservation of the concept of gender and the roles gender play in a popularly received singing competition show is to highlight and amplify the gender performativity with the help of musical and theatrical performances because of their capacity to create space for people to move across gender-based restrictions (Moisala, 1999).

As China has modernized and globalized, the traditional view that defines men and women within a familial relationships remain prevalent. People of different genders address each other with honorific titles that suggest both gender role and social power. When men are addressed as *gege* or *shushu*, they are naturally accorded with power and respect, while *jiejie* or *ayi* can imply disrespect or insult to females. The formation of relatedness by using honorific titles among judges and contestants in the show also indicates women’s continuing dependent and subordinate role in a patriarchy society. The discussion of the gender imbalance in popular music making and performing further substantiates men’s power and women’s marginalization in the industry. The achievements male contestants have made in the show demonstrate the freedom and agency they have been enjoying, while female musicians, both established and fresh, strive to make their voices to challenge the male-dominated music industry. At the same time, being able to sing songs of different genres and to present diverse performing styles, both male and female contestants disrupt the traditional gender norms that constrain them with limited responsibilities in music making and performing.
The conventional gender roles of men and women are further disturbed by the performances of various androgynous bodies and voices in the show. Their appearances re-introduce the once extremely controversial phenomenon to the audiences and reignite the curiosity to understand it. Unlike the social roar stirred by the non-normative performers in the singing competition shows in the early 2000s when the state intervened and eventually banned some of the controversial contestants (Harris & Rowan, 2013), the performers with transgressed bodies and voices in The Voice of China or Sing! China are not necessarily rejected by society. On the contrary, some are surprisingly active in the current popular music market and have been constantly invited to different programs sponsored by the states. This is to show both a loosening grip of the central government and a growing leniency of society toward gender representation.

Through the sound of the embodied voice and the envoiced body, I argue that, the show continues to problematize, complicated and challenge the traditional understanding of gender in Chinese society, a concept defined by the long-lasting Confucian doctrine and continuously shaped by the global efforts to articulate and negotiate its new connotation. As can be seen from the show, judges and contestants, male or female, are all subjected to the gender norms one way or another. Consequently, their social roles and their musical professionalism are both affected. The air of the show, on the one hand, blatantly addresses the burning issues and demonstrates how individuals suffer from and battle against problems associated with gender. On the other hand, it also attempts to make a call to the society that gender is a complicated and emergent aspect of social interaction that needs more awareness and understanding (Deutsch, 2007). The
performances of different genders not only facilitate the formation of voice diversity in the show and in the larger society but also contribute to the globalizing articulation and negotiations of gender. The following chapter continues to explore the voice diversity formed by contestants from newly emerged social strata.
CHAPTER V. MUSIC TASTES, PROFESSIONAL AMATEURISM, AND SOCIAL DIVIDE: THE FORMATION OF VOCAL DIVERSITY

On August 29, 2014, *The Voice of China* Season 3 aired Na Ying’s team battle rounds. The top four contestants were selected to advance to the next round in which one would be chosen to represent the team in the finale. The result, however, was surprising, as all four were young females with a pretty face, fair-colored skin tone, a slim body shape, clear eyes, and charming smile, physical attributes that meet traditional Chinese aesthetic feminine beauty standards (Man, 2000). *China Daily* published an article on August 30, 2014, accusing the show of being a beauty pageant instead of a singing competition and sarcastically suggesting that the show should change its name to “The Pretty Face of China.” Besides the attractive physical traits, the socially privileged backgrounds of the four contestants were also thought to be conducive to their winning, as described by a *Sina Entertainment* article. Professionally trained in popular music singing, 24-year-old Chen Bing stirred the most media uproar due to her extremely affluent family background, suspicious marital status, rumored plastic surgery, and previously active participation in various national singing competitions. The would-be champion Zhang Bicheng was questioned about her ethics in competing on the show as a veteran member of a South Korean girl band. San Francisco-born Liu Mingxiang was reported to be an alumna of the New York University and had participated in singing competitions both in the U.S. and Taiwan. Li Jiage, born in a working-class family, was seen as the underdog of the four. But the formal training she received from a national musical conservatory and the shared geographical bond with Judge Na Ying are the privileges that secures her a spot in the final four of Na’s team. The

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55 See the *China Daily* article at [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqcj/xfly/2014-08-30/content_12293046.html](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqcj/xfly/2014-08-30/content_12293046.html)

56. See the article on *Sina Entertainment* at [http://ent.sina.com.cn/z/v/2014-09-10/15184206547.shtml](http://ent.sina.com.cn/z/v/2014-09-10/15184206547.shtml)

57 Na Ying was born and raised in Liaoning province, one of the three provinces located in the northeast of China that share similar dialect, culture and history. Na has a particular interest in contestants coming from this area as she often plays the birthplace card in blind auditions to woo students to join her team. Na’s trainees Liang Bo and Zhang Lei who won the first and
musical training and performing experiences possessed by the four contestants not only played an important role in helping them to be included in the top four, but also reflected their financial, social, and educational privileges that enabled them to survive in the blind auditions and the battle rounds. In the contemporary Chinese musical landscape, musical skill is not the sole decisive factor to guarantee success on a personal level; one’s physical traits, nationality, and gender identity, as discussed in previous chapters, can also influence individual performance in the show and in the industry. On a societal level, one’s social origin and class status are even more powerful in determining a successful musical career.

In the process of commercialization, urbanization and globalization, new social groups have formed in Chinese society and new voices have been made by people from an increasingly divided class structure. Such a social phenomenon can be observed in The Voice of China and Sing! China as contestants come from families of different classes, have received different educations, perform different music genres, and tell different personal stories. Following Dong’s (2017) statement that voice helps “identify new social formations that are otherwise invisible” (p. 4), I explore the musical messages and personal stories both in the show and in the larger social context to reveal how different voices construct a reality of social stratification and to examine how music is employed as a tool to achieve social mobility. In this chapter, I first offer a historical account of how music is associated with the class stratification in Chinese society. Then, I discuss how the performances of a wide variety of music genres in the show reflect contestants’ different music tastes and the newly formed class culture in contemporary China. Next, I elaborate three important elements that distinguish professional musicians from amateur musicians and discuss how these criteria reflect the social divide between the two groups. Last, I explore the formation of vocal diversity by contestants from geographically different and
economically disparate places that influences the trajectory of their social status. I argue that although the voices made by contestants from a wide range of social backgrounds only represent a small portion of the billions in China’s population, as a contemporary popular cultural product, *The Voice of China* and the rebranded *Sing! China* do attempt to create a space for heterogeneous voices to be made and heard. Significantly, the wide airing of the show to millions of viewers helps spread the message that anyone’s voice can be the voice of China.

**The Association of Music with Class Stratification in Chinese History**

Music as an indicator of social class in Chinese society started in imperial times. Within the Han social stratification, Thrasher (1981) differentiates between the music of the literati and the music of the people. The former is associated with officials, scholars, and wealthy families who were educated in the Confucian tradition and advocated its values. To support and preserve this upper-class tradition, *yaji* (elegant gathering) was formed among people with similar artistic interests. They met informally to socialize and participate in art-related activities such as poetry, painting, calligraphy, and music. One typical example is the *guqin yaji* in which people met on a regular basis to play the seven-stringed plucked zither called *guqin*, to exchange musical skills and knowledge, and to have other artistic and daily conversations. In the imperial time, the *guqin* was exclusively associated with literati and its music represented the refinement and sophistication of the elite social class. Due to the complex structure and the aesthetic subtlety of *guqin* music, uneducated listeners were expected to find it challenging to understand with its many layers of timbre and dynamics as well as the extramusical content expressed in most compositions (Yung, 2009). Although in modern times, the *guqin* in Mainland China has been popularized among businesspeople, white-collar workers, and other middle-class members, the instrument continues to symbolize the high culture in Chinese society (Zhu, 2015).
In contrast, the music of the people, according to Thrasher (1981), has historically contained a wide range of musical activities such as instrumental ensemble and the performances of narrative song and opera. Playing a specific instrument and attending a particular music activity suggested the social status of both the performers and the audiences. For example, the *chuida* (literally blowing-hitting) instrumental ensemble is often defined as a ceremonial music of the people and appeared on occasions such as birthdays, marriages, funerals, and ancestor worship rituals. The performances of narrative song and opera normally occurred in the urban teahouse setting in which singers were employed by the teahouse owners or their clientele. The audiences were mainly local residents who came to enjoy the performance, have an informal meal, and socialize with others. Opera of different regional variants sponsored by wealthy families were also performed on outdoor stages to commemorate different events. These outdoor theatre circuits involved a large number of lower class but highly skilled musicians and performers, while audiences, aside from the sponsoring families, were local workers, farmers, and small merchants.

The literati lost its privileged social status with the ending of the imperial dynasties in China. The performances of traditional music also declined due to the social turmoil caused by political struggles and foreign invasions during the Republic Era (1912-1949). Big cities like Shanghai encountered a rapid population growth caused by peasants’ migration from the nearby countryside and quickly formed a powerful working class. This population growth became an important force to resist the imperialist oppression and to struggle for national sovereignty (Smith, 2002). In the 1920s, massive waves of labor protests erupted in Shanghai, in which protest songs were employed as a potent means to stir emotion, to forge identification with the nation, and to disseminate new political ideas (Ho, 2012; Smith, 2002). Class-consciousness was
raised during the Republic Era but was overshadowed by an urgent expression of militant nationalism (Smith, 2002). At that critical moment, numerous Western-trained vocalists and instrumentalists returned to China and joined in the anti-imperialism and nation-building cause by composing a type of “new music” that featured the application of European classical compositional techniques to Chinese musical source materials (Liu, 2010). At the same time, Shanghai was also the cultural site where different kinds of Western music were introduced, the early form of Chinese popular music *Shidaiqu* was created, and various modern musical institutions were founded and developed. In such a diverse musical landscape, people of different social classes were easily identifiable. For example, Yang (2017) observes how the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra was associated with the privileged classes, comprising “the Shanghailanders, the expatriates, wealthy Chinese bankers, powerful politicians, and compradors” (p.58), while in Chen’s (2005) study, the *Shidaiqu* singers, similar to the early narrative song performers and opera players, continued to be stigmatized and degraded in the society.

With the founding of the PRC in 1949, the use of music as political weapons to strengthen anti-war emotions and to arouse patriotic feelings was replaced by the Communist call for a class struggle. The change was initiated by Mao’s influential “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” in 1942 (Mao, 1965). The “Talks” explicitly stated that literature and art should reflect the Marxist proletarian ideology and serve “workers, peasants, soldiers and the urban petty bourgeoisie” (p.14) because they constituted the overwhelming majority of the nation and were consequently the mass of the people. In this canon, Mao encouraged the Communist cultural workers and artists to go to the people and learn from them in order to educate them. For Mao, workers and peasants did not just simply designate a class identity but also denoted a type of
producer who possessed a proper political consciousness and a keen sense of class struggle (Hung, 1996).

Throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, a great number of cultural figures and artists went to factories and farms to live among workers and peasants to learn their musical traditions. Revolutionary songs, adapted from folksongs from the field, became a new music genre to mobilize the proletariat to fight for the greater Communist ideal. This wave of socialist attitudes toward musical creativity, along with other artistic activities, reached a radical peak during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). During these years, traditional Chinese music, regional opera, classical Western music, and popular music were considered products of feudalism, imperialism, and capitalism and thus were banned in public space by the state. In particular, popular music was denigrated as “yellow music” because of its association with the erotic narratives of the urban underworld nightclubs and the unorthodox ideologies of the imperial powers and the native elites (Jones, 2001). Revolutionary songs and model operas became the ruling musical genre among the masses who performed them to demonstrate a dedication to the Communist ideology and to enjoy the only way of entertainment. In those musical forms, class struggle and proletarian consciousness were the key themes, which rendered the performing arts manipulated and subordinated to the political agenda (Xu, 2004).

The rise to power of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and the reforms he initiated shifted the state’s political attention from class struggle to economic development. Under his “open and reform” (Gaige kaifang) economic policy, foreign cultures were re-introduced and re-celebrated by urbanites in big cities, leading to the revival of urban leisure culture in which music-related

58 Revolutionary operas, or model operas, were planned and advocated for by Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife, during the Cultural Revolution. They were considered revolutionary in terms of thematic, musical, and lyrical features in contrast to the traditional operas. They were performed on stages, circulated via radio, made into films, and sung by millions of people. See more discussions in Chapter 5 of Lu’s (2004) book *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Impact on Chinese Thought, Culture, and Communication.*
activities such as singing and dancing in nightclubs and commercial ballrooms became prevalent and prosperous (Baranovitch, 2003). Farrer and Field (2015) have observed a change of the attendees’ social status in the leisure space of Shanghai. In the 1980s, dancing was regular entertainment for the state enterprise working class employees, while the 1990s saw the emergence of new social elites including overseas Chinese, returning Chinese, and affluent merchants, as nightclubs upgraded into palatial spaces for them to display their wealth and status. During these years, the urban-grown musical genre *qiuge* (prison song) emerged to articulate the new social and cultural diversity and non-mainstream sentiments through the use of lowbrow cultural traits such as vulgar language and an ethos of despair, cynicism, and antagonism (Baranovitch, 2003). This music genre was initiated and patronized by ex-convicts, rusticated *zhiqing*, private entrepreneurs, and China’s youths. The popularity of prison songs not only challenged the state’s hegemonic power and strict control over cultural products in the early reform years but also witnessed the formation of new social groups in a growing consumerist urban setting. At the same time in the rural areas of northwest China, an indigenous music style called *xibeifeng* (Northwest wind) was created as an artistic form to search for a desired imaginary past, a past when the peasantry was the powerful class representing the entire people of the Mainland (Baranovitch, 2003). Although created in desolate rural settings, *xibeifeng* music well resonated with the root-seeking cultural movement, a movement advocated by Chinese intellectuals to re-establish the traditional cultural roots in the face of the new flood of Western culture and to reconstruct a new collective identity that was damaged during the Cultural Revolution. Both musical fads, produced in different social settings and supported by diverse communities, reflected the similar aspirations and widespread needs of the people, that is, to

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59 *Zhiqing* refers to a group of urban educated youths who were sent by the central government from the late 1960s to the early 1970s to live and work in rural areas and frontier settlement to develop their talents amongst the rural population. Bonnin (2013) regards this group of people as a “lost generation”, as they lost both freedom and education opportunities.
express a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the society and to make a powerful call to change the social order.

This call burst into a shout for a new wave of revolution in Chinese rock. Chinese rock grew and prospered as an urban youth cultural form in China’s political center, Beijing. Before the Tiananmen incident in 1989, this music genre was predominantly patronized by college students and small underground bohemian circles, while after the crackdown, it became a sudden fad celebrated among general urban youths across the country to express their anger, defiance, and emotional compensation for the failure of the movement (Baranovitch, 2003). Although the radical commercialization of the 1990s and the government’s restriction endangered the rebellious (and political) spirit of rock, it remained an important music genre among Chinese youths to voice discontent (de Kloet, 2005). The ethos carried by rock and its spirit to stir up the youths continued to allow this music genre to speak for the nonmainstream and the marginalized groups in the contemporary Chinese society. At the same time, the rock musician circle has been continuously diversified, including both amateur and professional musicians from every stratum of the society. Besides the regular low-class performers such as traveling guitar players, migrant workers, and high school dropouts, this genre is also popular among working and middle-class members and professionals such as teachers, bar-owners, and even civil servants (Xiao, 2017).

The emergence of popular music singing contests since 2000 has provided an alternative path for people with musical talent not only to present their musical ability but also to gain access to fame, power, privilege, and mobility (Gamson, 1994). Turner (2006) claims that celebrity culture may have opened up the media access for once-marginalized groups, including people from a wider array of class positions. As the state-supported urban consumerism in China continues deepening in an increasingly globalized capitalist economy, China has witnessed both
the formation of a middle class and increasing socioeconomic inequality (Anagnost, 2008). As a well-received popular music singing contest, *The Voice of China* or the rebranded *Sing! China* serves as a venue not only to reflect social inequality and cultural disparities among people of different social strata but also allow them to perform on the same stage and enhance communication. In the following sections, I explore how contestants’ various social backgrounds shape their music tastes, how professional and amateur musicians are differentiated by several measurable factors that suggest the social divide between them, and how contestants from geographically diverse backgrounds are able to bridge the social divide in a limited performing space and time by exchanging their musical skills and life stories.

Cultural Capital, Music Tastes and the New Class Culture

Bourdieu’s (1984) contends that social stratification has an impact on music consumption and appreciation. For him, “nothing more clearly affirms one’s ‘class’, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music” (p. 18). His claim has been influential in the sociological study of music. Although his notion of music is limited to classical music performed in the French and/or European societies of his era, the broader point is that an appreciation of classical music represents high culture and is distinct from the immediate gratification associated with popular entertainment (Prior, 2013). Such an appreciation for high culture, according to Bourdieu, is not a matter of pure aesthetic judgment, but rather, a capability associated with the privileged social positions one acquires by being a member of a specific social class and promoting social mobility in a stratified society. This is what he defines as “cultural capital.” Bourdieu (1986) proposes that cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. The embodied cultural capital describes one’s long-lasting dispositions that are consciously acquired or passively inherited. The objectified form of cultural capital includes the material
objects that are owned or obtained while maintaining their conceptually pre-existing cultural significance. Institutionalized cultural capital refers to the institutional recognition of one’s cultural competence and authority in the form of academic credentials or qualifications. Bourdieu also points out that people of higher status groups have more cultural capital at their disposal than those of lower status; certain forms of cultural capital are valued over others, which may help or hinder one’s social mobility and can also be major sources of social inequality.

Related to the concept of cultural capital is Bourdieu’s (1992) notion of *habitus*, a system of unconsciously acquired dispositions that define and shape one’s broad behavioral trajectories and life experiences. The *habitus* allows individuals to follow an internalized set of “master patterns” that are developed in one’s family upbringing and conditioned by one’s social origins. In a narrow sense of the musical *habitus*, one’s musical taste can be shaped by what kind of music is consumed and appreciated in the household in which one grows up.

To observe how one’s social status has an impact on musical taste might be difficult in Today’s China due to the unstable definition of social class and the nebulous distinction between highbrow and lowbrow music consumption with the rise of new media (Luo, 2017). China was born out of a proletariat revolution in which peasants and workers were the leading power. During Mao’s era, the proletariat class was extended to include intellectuals and the party cadres. The economic reform since the 1980s has further complicated the class categorization with the rise of “new rich,” rural-urban migrant workers, and the middle class (Dong, 2012). In the 1990s, the Party leadership employed “social strata” to replace Marxist class analysis to express the concern about the changing social structure (Anagnost, 2008). This was intended to reduce social inequality and antagonism caused by “a few who get rich first” in the new economic and social
conditions. But the change of language has not prevented a growing social divide in Chinese society in terms of income level and access to power and status. Given the complexity and difficulty in defining China’s social class in the second decade of the new millennium, using “hard” criteria such as income, occupation, education, and social origin is insufficient and inaccurate to describe individual and collective class status. Following Dong’s (2012) suggestion to use “soft” criteria such as semiotic resources, lifestyle, and taste to understand social change and class (re)stratification, I explore how popular music is employed in the contemporary Chinese society for people to implicitly and explicitly claim their social class and distinguish themselves from people of other strata since cultivated disposition and cultural competence can be revealed in the nature of the cultural goods consumed (Bourdieu, 1984). In particular, I identify and examine three roughly defined social groups among contestants in The Voice of China and the rebranded Sing! China—the privileged, the underprivileged, and those in between—according to their musical performances, conversational exchanges, and the follow-up media reports.

The privileged group includes a small number of contestants who are either from a wealthy family or a celebrity family. In Chinese society, the former is commonly known as fuerdai (the child of the nouveau riche), whereas the latter is termed as xingerdai (the child of the entertainment star). Both enjoy a naturally high social status because their parents who accumulated economic, social, and cultural capital during the reform era have unconditionally granted these assets to them. The different kinds of capital they possess are demonstrated by their musical tastes and revealed in the after-performance interviews. The grand discourse of social

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60“Let some people get rich first” was one of the guidelines of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reform he made during the Southern Tour of 1992. The statement unshackled Maoist egalitarianism and motivated people to join in the market economy but also caused the huge income divide of rich and poor as well as corruptions. See more discussions in the Economist article “Market reforms mean that China is becoming more unequal” at https://www.economist.com/node/639652, and The New York Times article “How Deng Xiaoping helped create a corrupt China” at https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/04/opinion/hao-tong-how-deng-xiaoping-helped-create-a-corrupt-china.html
inequality is thus clearly reflected in the singing competition. These privileged contestants tend to perform English songs instead of simply singing in Mandarin. The linguistic ability, a form of embodied cultural capital, allows them to be differentiated from those who have a lesser linguistic range. In addition, the ability to speak and sing in English is often associated with the experience of studying abroad, which suggests the financial resources the family can provide and the international academic credentials one can obtain as a form of the institutionalized cultural capital. Another feature seen among this group of contestants is the inclination to deconstruct, adapt, and re-create songs from the musical, lyrical, and instrumental sense. The ability to so do as a form of embodied cultural capital is considered as a special musical talent deriving either from a natural gift or professional expertise, both of which are highly celebrated in the contemporary Chinese music industry.

In the first season of The Voice of China, the Beijing-born and overseas-educated female contestant Hou Zuxin surprised judges more with her personal story than her musical talent in the blind audition. Hou presented an adapted, chirpy jazz version of Elvis Presley’s “Love Me Tender” (1956) and won the chair-turn of Na Ying. She was seen as devoted and calm in the performance, naturally moving her body with the rhythm and skillfully controlling the stage. Such performing proficiency is normally seen in experienced singers. The dialogue Hou had with judges demystified the reason behind it. Hou’s father was a renowned rock musician in the 1990s and Hou had been visiting recording studios since she was a child. Thus, the musical habitus Hou had accumulated with the help of her father and her early engagement in musical activities helped to shape her musical tastes. She declared in front of the judges that her affection for jazz inspired her to adapt Elvis’s slow ballad into a cheerful and fast-paced piece. With more discussion, Na Ying and Liu Huan eventually recognized her and both started to share anecdotes.
of how they knew Hou as a child and how they used to socialize with her father. The special connection Hou re-established with the judges is what Bourdieu (1986) describes as social capital, a durable network of mutual acquaintances, recognition, and credentials. In addition, Hou’s self-identification as a master’s student majoring in film at the University of Southern California further enriched her cultural capital and solidified her upper-level social status. Although Hou did not get far in the singing competition, she was able to transform the various forms of capital she possesses into resources and privileges that she continues to enjoy. After the show, she directed a documentary titled My Dad’s a Rocker (2014) that won an award at the International Documentary Association. With such an honor, she was invited by universities, television shows, and online speech forums to share her stories and perspectives on Chinese rock and film.61

*Fuerdai* contestants are also able to disclose the privileges they possess on the stage. In Season 3, the high school graduate Zheng Junshu performed Secret Garden’s cover song “You Raise Me Up” (2001) in the blind audition and won three votes from the judges. In the after-performance conversations, Zheng stated that he was accepted by both the Communication University of China and the Berklee College of Music in Boston. Judges and on-site audiences were immediately impressed and burst into exclamation. The capability of being simultaneously accredited by top educational institutions in both China and the U.S. suggests both the economic and cultural capital he possesses and the social capital he may soon obtain. After the show, Zheng chose to go to Berklee College of Music, despite the high cost of the program.62 At school, Zheng was selected to join in the student ensemble as the only Asian to tour at renowned

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62 The school’s official website lists the highest possible yearly cost for an undergraduate is around 69,000 US dollars, excluding one’s daily expenses such as food, clothing, entertainment, etc. See [https://www.berklee.edu/paying-for-your-education/cost-attendance](https://www.berklee.edu/paying-for-your-education/cost-attendance). As an international student, the budget will be even higher due to other costs such as travel and other fees for non-citizens.
universities in the U.S. He also secured the opportunity to perform on the stage with alumni Wong Leehom, one of the most successful pop musicians in the global Chinese market.63 Outstanding as he is, Zheng’s fuerdai identity was still highly questioned online.64 Due to the fact that the term is notoriously associated with being extremely spoiled and unmannered, people labeled as fuerdai are imagined to obnoxiously spend their parents’ money on luxury parties, gambling, and drugs, and flaunt their lifestyle (Zhu et al, 2017). Both Hou and Zheng’s stories confirm that privileged social status can be implemented as various types of capital to shape one’s musical taste and more importantly, to allow the individual to continue to enjoy and expand the privilege not only in music circles but also in the larger society.

Sitting on the other side of the continuum are the underprivileged contestants who see the show as an opportunity for upward mobility. Similar to the privileged group, they are also small in number. Engaging in musical practice in China is an expensive investment, which includes professional training, and purchasing instruments, performance attire, technological support, etc. Without sufficient financial resources, one may not obtain enough musical skills and performance experience, and thus have difficulty getting through the various pre-auditions before the broadcasted blind audition. For those who manage to appear in the show, their lower class status is often manipulated as motivational stories to fit into the show’s politically correct ideology, which asserts that people from all walks of life should have the right to pursue their dreams because the realization of personal dreams contributes to the construction of the grand Chinese Dream. In Season 1, the female contestant Huang He performed Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep” and won three votes from the judges. Her loud and strongly punctuated vocal performance

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63 See the report in Chinese at https://kknews.cc/zh-my/entertainment/anqyrnv.html
64 An article entitled “Background Checking of The Voice of China Contestant: Fuerdai Zheng Junshu” was widely circulated on different online platforms. See one version at http://lady.163.com/14/0720/18/A1K9NPK900264M4F_all.html. On the largest Chinese communication bulletin website Baidu Tieba, netizens questioned Zheng’s intention to flaunt his wealth in the show. See http://tieba.baidu.com/p/3188223277
interpreted the originally bluesy gospel pop song into a powerful rock style, a performance that allowed her to win critical acclaim among the audience. But unlike the privileged contestants with oversea experience who embrace linguistic ability as a form of cultural capital, Huang’s English pronunciation was extensively criticized. In the after-performance conversations, Huang openly shared the bad economic situation her family was experiencing because her parents were laid-off workers.66 Besides Huang, there is also construction worker Huang Kai in Season 4, who came to pursue his music dream, Li Zhixian in Season 3, who was a truck driver during the day and pub substitute singer during the night, and Beibei in Season 4, who used to do a variety of temporary jobs to earn a living. These contestants all chose to perform rock or songs that contain a fighting spirit because, as a few of them mentioned in the show, the power embedded in the lyrical and musical language allowed them to vent dissatisfaction, anger, and rebellion as well as to express determination, perseverance, and motivation in a society where their social status puts them in a passive and disadvantageous situation.

The majority of the contestants fall into the in-between category. They come from what audiences would consider “ordinary” families that are able to provide them with access to musical instruments and musical training, to afford to send them to national conservatories, and to sponsor them initially in their musical careers. Some see the show as a platform for musical practice, others consider it a channel to exchange musical expertise, and still others think of it as an opportunity for upward mobility. But unlike the privileged contestants who can utilize various types of capital at their will to cement their higher status, those in between have to fight harder to

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65 Huang’s performance entitled “AMAZING Chinese Girl Covers Rolling In The Deep”, has received more than 2.6 million viewership on YouTube. Viewers speak highly of her singing but also criticize her English pronunciation. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIDBR_F_r4Y
66 Laid-off workers or xiagang gongren refer to a large number of urban workers who used to work in the state-owned enterprises but were laid off since the 1990s because of the institutional reform of these enterprises. The system, as described by Hurst et al. (2009), causes the material loss of livelihood, political privileged and social status, and the mental damages coming from the shocking and rapid social dislocation and the disintegration of the class membership.
survive in the music industry and to elevate their social status. Winners in each season—Liang Bo, Li Qi, Zhang Bichen, Zhang Lei, Jiang Dunhao, and Tashi Phuntsok—can all be included in this category due to the personal stories they shared in the show and the public profile available online. At the same time, they also have more freedom in terms of musical practices, compared to the underprivileged group. For example, Liang performed both pop and rock, while Tashi Phuntsok sang pop, rap, and world music. Li and Zhang Bichen performed pop in the show and have sung television drama theme songs in their later career. While Zhang Lei persistently sang campus folk, Jiang fused rock and folk in his performance. Their personal success in the show may be attributed to the musical talent they possess, but the in-between social status that allowed them access to professional training and performance opportunities also played pivotal roles. Thus, they are more prepared and eligible in the music scene than the underprivileged contestants.

To categorize contestants into the three groups is by no means to generalize and simplify their social status. Even within the in-between category, there exist hierarchy and heterogeneity. A December 2013 news article offers a nine-tier dissection of China’s contemporary class structure based on political power, wealth, and prestige. The dissection roughly defines the first three tiers as the ruling class, ranking four to six as middle class, and the bottom three as the underclass.67 The limited number of contestants in the show can hardly reflect the total range of categorization. After all, they only represent a minimal portion of the entire Chinese population. There are more people whose voices are muted and unheard. But at least the show serves as a platform for people of different strata to interact and communicate with each other and such an opportunity may propel them out of their own stratum constraints and allow them to hear the

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voices of others.

**Time, Money, and Quality: The Social Divide of Professional and Amateur Musicians**

A different way to perceive the social stratification is to observe how professional and amateur musicians reveal their social status with musical practices in the show and how such a revelation is representative of the larger society. The social divide between professional and amateur musicians in Chinese society can be traced back to imperial times. Under Confucian ideology, amateur musicians, members of the literati, sat at the top rank of the society and played music to cultivate their character and morality, whereas professional musicians were of low social status who provided musical service for social functions or entertainment and to earn a living (Lau, 2008). Employing music for different purposes, the literati were able to separate themselves from the working musicians and to protect their superior social status. During Mao’s era, the lower class professional musicians under the Confucian classification were recruited for the Party’s propaganda to advocate the Communist ideology, whereas the former elite amateur musicians were excluded from this mission and their privileged amateurism was unwelcome in the changed sociopolitical environment (Lau, 2008). Thus, on the one hand, the lower class professional musicians were promoted into a favorable social status and their musical activities were sponsored by the government and legitimatized as the heritage of the masses. On the other hand, the social prestige imbedded in the title of “amateur musician” was degraded to a status of being unwanted by the government, and was associated with a lack of formal training and musical knowledge (Lau, 2008). Under the new definition advocated by the state, not only were the social statuses of professional and amateur musicians reversed, but the boundary between the two was also blurred. Although music was manipulated for class struggle in Mao’s era, the political intervention could be viewed as a step for the vocational elevation of musicians in
Chinese society.

With the introduction of the market economy in the 1980s, popular music in China was commercialized, offering musicians a legitimate and effective way to accumulate their economic capital and thus, to change their social status. Being aware of such a potential for change, individuals with an interest in music and non-professional musicians became increasingly drawn to the career path. The various singing competition shows in more recent years have grown into a universally celebrated space where amateur musicians have been able to turn into professional ones, effecting a change in their economic and social status, as observed by Meizel (2011) in *American Idol*. Thus, those singing competition shows function as liminal spaces where amateurs and professionals are both distinguished and connected. But what are the criteria that make the distinctions and how effective are these criteria to evaluate the professionalism of a musician? How do these criteria reflect the different social statuses of professional and amateur musicians?

In the particular context of televised singing competition shows, Meizel (2011) questions whether singers should be considered professionals as long as they appear on the show, and whether they revert to amateur status during their time awaiting the judgment, even if they make a living outside of the show.

Stebbins (1992) points out three measurable aspects of the modern understanding of the professional in American society: the amount of time spent, money made, and the excellence of the service provided. The three measurements may not be inclusive enough to describe the distinction between professional and amateur musicians in Chinese society, but they can definitely reflect some major differences in social status between these two groups. These differences can be well observed in *The Voice of China* and the rebranded *Sing! China*, where contestants with musical talents aspire to make such a transformation: they were amateur singers
and “nobody” before the show, but turned into “somebody” after the show. The time consumed by musicians is a quantitative measurement that can be as accurate as hours and minutes per day and per week. But unlike the fixed work schedule for corporate employment, musicians, like other artists, tend to maintain particular daily rituals—including a flexible time schedule (Currey, 2013)—that allow them to create and practice musical pieces freely. In this sense, both professional and amateur musicians may invest as much time as they can in musical practices, depending on how much time is available to them and how much of it they want to utilize. Amateur musicians can devote even more time if they are extremely passionate and desire to elevate their musical skills, whereas established professional musicians may have less time for practice and performance due to non-musical commitments they have, such as management, publicizing, and other social responsibilities.

The difference in time spent in musical preparation between amateur and professional musicians reflects the privilege professional musicians possess in the musical industry; that is, they have more agency in music making and performing because their professional status has been legitimized by the industry and recognized by society. Thus, they can invest the time they want in musical practices while utilizing their musical expertise to expand their non-musical work. For example, Judge Harlem Yu reached the peak of his musical career in the 1990s and after that, he became active as a television host in Taiwan. His non-musical investments include a popular club for live music and a restaurant. Similarly, other judges all started their non-musical businesses after they reached a certain point in their musical career. Wang Feng released his Beats-style headphone in 2015, while Jay Chou invested in a luxury video game café in 2017.68

Entertainment celebrities in China, including musicians, tend to establish their side jobs as soon as they become famous because their reputation as musicians can be utilized in commercial endorsements for their own businesses (Hung, 2014). Accordingly, their working hours in their professional roles are largely reduced. The reduced time they invest in musical practice may cause a decreasing amount of money made from the profession, whereas the side business can grow into major sources of income. Numerous media reports describe how Chinese entertainment celebrities invest in such a wide range of businesses, such as restaurants, hi-tech companies, fashion industry, wine business, real estate, etc., that their professional roles from which they receive the bulk of livelihood become secondary. In this sense, both time and money became less effective tools to evaluate the professionalism and to measure the difference between professional and amateur musicians in the Chinese popular music landscape. However, what can be substantiated is the power of celebrity status that, in Marshall’s (1997) understanding, is associated with formative social and cultural power in consumer capitalism, and suggests the distinctions and definitions of success and having a voice above others. In the Chinese context, the financial freedom and social privilege the established musicians attain from both their musical practices and non-musical businesses become the exact incentives for amateur musicians or any individuals to imagine a shortcut to an elevation of social status.

For contestants who came to the show to be recognized and to make the transformation to professional musicians, the time and money criteria also reflect the difference between their social status and that of professional musicians. In pre-performance monologues and after-performance conversations, multiple contestants described how they were so dedicated to and

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69 An article entitled “Celebrity Bosses Who Cannot Make Money Are Not Good Celebrities” was published by Sohu Entertainment on December 7, 2016 to describe the lucrative sideline businesses owned by celebrities. See http://www.sohu.com/a/120896700_453601, Similar articles can be found at http://finance.people.com.cn/money/GB/17729519.html and http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_56c9ef0f0101d21h.html
absorbed in musical performing that they spent long hours practicing a single song in order to be recruited onto the show. In Season 4 of *The Voice of China*, 24-year-old fertilizer salesman Zhu Qiang won three votes from the judges with his unique performance of a piece of Chinese Wind music. His success was presented as well deserved as he described how he engaged in elevating his musical skills after being rejected in the blind auditions from the previous season. His father testified in front of the camera that Zhu had almost never stepped out of his room in the past year and had never stopped practicing singing. Zhu also admitted that he had to quit his fertilizer sales job and started to live-stream his singing on the Internet at least six hours per day to ensure that he had enough time for singing and enough money for living. Zhu’s story shows his determination and perseverance in musical practices, but his change of profession from a salesperson to a live-streaming singer complicated the distinction between professional and amateur musician. Now that Zhu was a full-time singer and made money from the profession, could he be considered a professional musician? If so, the money he made from being a musician was only a basic level of sustenance, a minimal proportion compared to the amount of money established musicians make from their reduced professional roles. In this sense, Zhu’s story further weakens the assumption that money earned can be a criterion in the distinction between professional and amateur musicians, but further confirms the economic hardship one has to cope with as a not-yet-established and unrecognized musician, and the difficulty in upgrading social status through performing music.

The third measurable aspect that differentiates professional and amateur musicians in the case of the show is the “better than” quality of the singing performances. Such quality, according to Stebbins (1992), can be substantiated by the evaluations given by established and influential musicians and the institutionalized means of validating the adequacy of training such as
examinations and licenses that can authenticate one’s professional status. Contestants come to
the singing competition and await the judgment of established musicians, musical producers, and
audiences. As discussed in Chapter Two, the voting system in the show entitles the four judges to
select the most qualified contestants from the pool of contestants. But such a selection process
can be biased and personal, and thus the evaluation given by them is not always reliable. Instead,
institutionalized methods are considered the most authoritative and the most popular means of
evaluation in Chinese society, and standard examinations in music conducted by different
national and regional conservatories have become a significant trend in music education (Zhang,
2016). Therefore, training at professional institutions or passing these musical tests have become
the turning points for individuals to be accepted as professional musicians, because they are
associated with accumulating knowledge, skills, and experience. For example, Baranovitch
(2009) describes how the well-known ethnic Mongolian musician Teng Ge’er’s attainment of
professionalism came through years of formal training in a national musical conservatory.
Therefore, accomplished formal musical training is seen as the most important criterion to
differentiate professional musicians from amateurs in modern Chinese society. However, given
the reality that receiving formal musical training and engaging in musical practices is an
expensive investment in China, such a criterion also indicates a social privilege possessed by
whomever can afford it.

Besides time, money, and quality, Stebbins (1992) also proposes defining professionals and
amateurs with other attributes such as a sense of identity, attainment of social values, and self-
regulation. But his three primary measurable aspects offer a better differentiation between the
social statuses of professional and amateur musicians in Chinese society. Professional musicians
have more freedom in music practices, more accessible financial resources, and higher social
status only when they become socially recognized and widely celebrated. With this acquired power and privilege, they can enjoy a comfortable upper-middle-class position created by the title. That is the exact reason why amateur musicians, students in the music major, and even somewhat established singers came to perform in the show. In the first season of *The Voice of China*, Guan Zhe, a professional singer-songwriter who had already released his albums, came to compete with unknown contestants. His mature singing skills eventually allowed him to be included in the top sixteen of this season, but his established professional identity and the business ethics of the show were questioned extensively by the audience. However, these criticisms did not affect Guan’s singing career whatsoever. On the contrary, he admitted that the show helped boost his income and he was finally able to take his parents to enjoy a fancy overseas vacation.\(^70\) In this sense, what the show has provided is a space not only for amateur singers to become professional, but also for professional musicians to increase their exposure and further elevate their economic and social status. This precisely confirms the wide social divide between professional and amateur musicians and explains why so many individuals aspire to pursue music as their lifelong career. This chapter’s next section continues to explore the different social statuses reflected by contestants from a wide range of geographic locations.

**The Overseas, Urbanites, Migrants, and Ruralites: Voices from Everywhere**

The previous sections discuss the social disparity demonstrated by contestants with or without economic, social and cultural capital as well as the privileges possessed by professional musicians and difficulties faced by amateur musicians. Such a discussion highlights the differences and incompatibility among the groups and among individuals. This section continues

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\(^70\) An article entitled “Guan Zhe, give me a reason not to criticize you” synthesizes the media reports and audience opinions about how and why Guan Zhe is always been unwelcome in the Chinese popular music circle. It can be accessed at http://www.sohu.com/a/55801853_378580. Another article entitled “Guan Zhe’s performing cost is 240,000 RMB after The Voice of China?” includes the interview of him, describing the big increase of fee for invited performances. See http://news.ifeng.com/gundong/detail_2012_12/05/19858563_0.shtml
to explore the discrepancy among contestants from geographically heterogeneous backgrounds that are associated with ascribed or achieved social status (Linton, 1936). In the following paragraphs, I examine how and why a person’s birthplace may predetermine one’s social status, and how it is associated with or without certain rights, resources, and opportunities in Chinese society.

In 1955, the *hukou* system, a system of household registration describing the residential location and socio-economic eligibility, was established by the Chinese government to solidify the administrative control of the population. The *hukou* status indicates an individual’s place of regular residence and the type of registration, generally referred to as “agricultural” and “non-agricultural” or “rural” and “urban.” Such a categorization not only divided the population into two castes, with the urban residents economically and socially superior to the rural population, but also created obstacles to geographical and social mobility (Chan & Zhang, 1998). Despite the continuous reform of the *hukou* system in later years, a highly rigid status hierarchy between urban and rural residents and the discriminations against people of rural origins are still largely existent and powerful in Chinese society. The rise of China as the world’s factory in the 1990s witnessed a large influx of rural residents moving to cities to seek better opportunities, who were referred as migrant workers (Maurer-Fazio et al., 2015). Moving into cities, however, does not legitimize their urban citizenship rights and they continue to be marginalized in terms of employment, working conditions, social security, medical benefits, education of migrant children, housing, and discrimination by urban residents (Wong et al., 2007).

Although the *hukou* system identifies polarized rural and urban statuses, a rural-urban continuum theory can better describe the current geographical and social differences in China as small-towns function politically, economically, and culturally as space to balance China’s
increasing differentiation between urban and rural (Dewey, 1960; Lu, 2010). However, like people of rural origins, people from small towns are largely discriminated against by urbanites due to the townships’ association with backwardness and lack of resources. It is also because of marginalization in the urban-rural divide that small-town people are highly likely to move to big cities and become migrant workers. In the course of industrialization and urbanization, the institutional hukou system, designed more than half a century ago, is gradually declining in its extreme control of China’s demographic distribution and internal migration, but still fosters a social divide among individuals of rural and urban origins. This divide is rendered visible by contestants in The Voice of China and Sing! China who implicitly or explicitly indicate their birthplaces or places of residence. At another glance, such a demonstration of the social divide can be also reflected by contestants’ different music tastes, performing styles and stage manners.

In the first season of The Voice of China, 26-year-old Zou Hongyu unreservedly declared his agricultural hukou status, reaveling in his introductory video that he was born in a small village in a northeastern province of China. Zou then described how his passion for music enabled him to practice singing whether he was doing farm work or having a rest and whether he was on the top of the mountain or in the backyard of his house. But such a passion was unrelatable and unrecognized in his neighborhood because, as Zou’s father later testified in the video, people in that area mainly engage in farming and nobody is interested in music or understands music well. Such a low engagement in music possibly arises from the local rural residents’ busy farming schedule and limited accessibility to music. Sun and Leung’s (2014) study show that music education in the rural areas of northeastern China faces a variety of difficulties such as the inadequate support by the local government, teachers’ lack of professional training and experience, and inaccurate understanding of the curriculum. Compared to urban
music education that involves well-trained professional music teachers, teachers in China’s rural schools usually teach all subjects, including music (Xie & Leung, 2011), and thus the music education received by students in rural schools lags far behind that of their urban counterparts. On a personal level, Zou’s story based on his agricultural hukou status confirms the huge divide between rural and urban residents in terms of accessibility to music and other resources.

In the blind audition, Zou performed Louis Armstrong’s ballad “What a Wonderful World” (1967) by fusing the elements of jazz, blues, and soul. When Judges Yang Kun, Harlem Yu, and Liu Huan turned the chair for him, all seemed to be surprised by seeing a male wearing a white T-shirt and a pair of white pants calmly singing his own tunes with a soft and androgynous voice, because, in their imagination, the voice should have come from a middle-aged black female vocalist. But more to their surprise was when Zou told the judging panel that he was from a small rural village. Judge Liu Huan immediately asked the question, “as a person living in the rural area, why do you choose to practice English songs?” Zou responded, “people in my hometown favor revolutionary songs, but I want to follow my heart to sing what I like.” This short conversation reveals two facts. First, in rural China, people are less exposed to English language songs and songs of foreign musical genres, and they know little about music except the politically saturated revolutionary songs from early years. Second, the judges are more surprised than impressed to see Zou’s ability to sing an English language song in an exotic genre. But if Zou was not from the rural area, he would be simply praised with his unique voice and outstanding performance, the same as any other contestant in the show who sing with an androgynous voice and who perform jazz, blues, and soul. The dialogue between Zou and Liu substantiates a generally acknowledged reality that people from rural areas in China do not have the same access to musical resources (as well as other resources) as their urban counterparts do.
The social divide still exists and is affecting people of rural origins. Zou is but one of a few contestants appearing in the show who are identified with the agricultural *hukou* status. He is fortunate to have the opportunity to show his musical talents, while competing against other contestants with formal musical training and more performing experiences. However, Zou was soon defeated by a 25-year-old female fashion model from an urban family in the following round.

Geographically-based social disparity can also be observed between overseas Chinese contestants and their domestic counterparts. Overseas contestants, in general, demonstrate a privileged status in the possession of economic and cultural forms of capital. Most of them are first-or second-generation immigrants from middle-and upper-class families and are well educated, capable of speaking multiple languages, and have formal musical training or rich performing experiences. Their parents chose to migrate to developed countries at a time when China was not politically and economically strong. The ability to relocate to a different country in that era, and to create opportunities for their children to return to their motherland when China became an economic power, reflects their higher social status, either ascribed or achieved. The participation of overseas contestants in the show, on a national level, as discussed in Chapter 2, is seen as a roots-seeking journey and a reunion with their motherland. On a personal level, it can also be interpreted as the fulfillment of the traditional Chinese cultural value “to bring glory to one’s ancestry” (*yao zu yang zong*) and “to return to one’s hometown with honor” (*rong gui gu li*) (Lu, 2010). The glory and honor they attempt to bring back to their motherland include the economic and social recognition they have obtained in their residence countries, indicators of a superior social status that their domestic counterparts may find difficult to achieve.

In Season 4 of *The Voice of China*, 21-year-old Los Angelino Michael Liu adapted Judge
Jay Chou’s “Shuang Jie Kun” (2001) by rapping in six different languages and adding an extremely fast rhythm to the original refrain. Liu’s special talent for beats, flow and language had already been recognized on YouTube prior to his participation in the show. One of his video clips featuring a rap song in twelve different accents has nearly 1.8 million viewers.\(^{71}\) When Liu came to perform in *The Voice of China*, one of his hopes, as he stated in the introductory video, was to see whether his talent could be recognized by Chinese musicians in his motherland. With skillful control of beats and language flow, Liu got three votes from the judging panel, including Chou. His performing style was both questioned by audiences who believed him to intentionally use rap beats and languages to show off and praised by others as something fresh, creative, and impressive.\(^{72}\) Regardless of his intention, the unique performance did reflect the resources he had access to as someone who grew up in the U.S. and whose family tradition is strongly Chinese. In different interviews,\(^{73}\) Liu told how he grew up being exposed to the most updated trends of the American hip-hop culture and gradually developed an interest in world languages by making friends from across the world at the University of Southern California. These experiences eventually inspired him to create the YouTube video that went viral. Liu’s personal growth and success story suggest a high social status he was born with and the privilege he accumulated as an American-born Chinese rapper and a YouTube celebrity. Although Liu did not stay long in the show, the ascribed status and accumulated privileges will continue to benefit him in his personal

\(^{71}\) “Rap Song in 12 Accents” by Michael Liu has 1,795,075 views and had been liked by 38,000 people as of 04/26/2018. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYcjMEgIpm8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYcjMEgIpm8)

\(^{72}\) A discussion panel was created on the Chinese online forums Zhihu entitled “How to Evaluate Liu’s Performance in *The Voice of China* on July 31.” In this panel, respondents mostly gave negative feedback on his rapping skills, Chinese articulation and pronunciation, while some appreciated the feel he presented in the performance and the part when he rapped in English. See the discussion at [https://www.zhihu.com/question/33809185](https://www.zhihu.com/question/33809185)

\(^{73}\) Two interviews were published in 2018, three years after he performed in *The Voice of China*, indicating that Liu has an active career in China. In both articles, he is described as someone with multiple talents. See article at [https://www.xuehua.us/2018/03/22/%E3%80%90%E7%8B%AC%E8%AE%BF%E3%80%91%E4%BB%BF%E5%A5%BDB% E5%A3%B0%E9%9F%B3%E5%88%B0%E6%9C%89%E5%98%BB%E5%93%88%E6%BC%8C%E6%9F%B3%E7%95%85%E6%BA%90%E7%9A%84%E5%A4%9A%E5%85%83%E9%9F%B3%E4%B9%90%E7%90%86zh-cn/, http://www.guaixun.com/article/content_147892_1_3.html](https://www.xuehua.us/2018/03/22/%E3%80%90%E7%8B%AC%E8%AE%BF%E3%80%91%E4%BB%BF%E5%A5%BDB%E5%A3%B0%E9%9F%B3%E5%88%B0%E6%9C%89%E5%98%BB%E5%93%88%E6%BC%8C%E6%9F%B3%E7%95%85%E6%BA%90%E7%9A%84%E5%A4%9A%E5%85%83%E9%9F%B3%E4%B9%90%E7%90%86zh-cn/, http://www.guaixun.com/article/content_147892_1_3.html)
life and his music career. Liu is one of the many overseas contestants who displayed a privileged (overseas) social status in the show. But the privileges vary depending on which country contestants are from and what kind of family they grew up in. These privileges could be as broad as economic, social, and cultural, and as specific as educational, musical, and linguistic. In fact, their appearances in the blind auditions as overseas individuals confirm both the personal capacity that is supported by their ascribed or achieved status obtained in their residence countries and the social recognition of a nationally broadcast Chinese singing competition show in their motherland.

Despite visible or invisible social status differences, overseas and domestic contestants show positive attitudes toward embracing the differences with open-mindedness, mutual understanding and appreciation, and active communication and interaction. For example, in the second season of Sing! China, when the Canadian female singer Zizi, who was raised in a musical family and used to be the vocalist in a Vancouver-based R&B and funk band, competed against the self-taught singer Tashi Phuntsok, who is a high school teacher from a small city in Tibet, the social divide was clearly noticed in terms of financial status, musical experience, educational background, and social recognition. Having realized Phuntsok’s natural and superb musical talent, Zizi expressed great appreciation and admiration. In fact, all judges and invited coaches, more than once, gave unanimously positive feedback, describing Phuntsok’s musical talent as “beyond assessment.” In this sense, music allows Phuntsok to stand out from his everyday social status and, between Zizi and Phuntsok, the seemingly wide social divide becomes reconciled at the temporary moment and in the liminal space.

As a popular cultural product that aspires to include contestants from the global Chinese community, The Voice of China and the rebranded Sing! China serve as a venue to observe how
social division is reflected in both the musical performances and the conversational statements of contestants of different social origins. Contestants from geographically diverse locations display different economic, social, and cultural differences. Some have to move to cities in search of better life and working opportunities, while others choose to reunite with their motherland from different countries and to seek a sense of belonging. There seem to be similarities between the internal and international migrants in terms of border crossing and experience of dislocation (Guo & Iredale, 2015). But those who have to transgress the hukou regime and those who choose to cross the national border differ substantially in motivation, capability, and practice of migration. On top of these major differences, the disparate origins of the two groups of migrants and the different treatments they receive in their destinations underline the existence of a social divide in the contemporary Chinese society. Fortunately, The Voice of China and the rebranded Sing! China offer a platform for them to exchange both musical skills and life experiences. More importantly, the show demonstrates the possibility of negotiation and reconciliation, allowing contestants to perform on the same stage, to be trained by the renowned established musicians, and to develop their musical skills and accumulate performing experiences. At least, in this liminal space and at the temporary moment, voices are made and heard from everywhere.

Conclusion

Four decades after the open and reform policy, China has grown into one of the world’s largest economies. In this process, the socialist egalitarian country has been transformed into a market-oriented and socio-economically diversified society in which new social groups are formed and different voices need to be heard (Dong, 2017). The formation of these groups and the making of these voices reflect the increasingly widening social stratification in contemporary Chinese society. As a popular cultural product, The Voice of China and the rebranded Sing!
China offer an alternative space to observe this social phenomenon, as contestants from diverse family backgrounds present different music performances and tell unique personal stories. In the show, one’s social status is easily identified through the musical performances, verbal communications, and visual messages such as performing style, stage manner, attire, and makeup. These verbal and non-verbal signs are shaped as one grows up in varied family environments and has different access to musical resources.

The association of music with one’s social status in Chinese society has a long history and with the changes of political environment, music has been defined differently and often manipulated to propagate the ruling ideology. With the deepening of the socialist economy and the ever-increasing consumerism of contemporary China, music making and performing are able to reflect the interests of different social groups: the privileged, the underprivileged, and those in between. This roughly made categorization is based on the various forms of capital one has access to and the music taste one forms in upbringing. A different way to understand how music reflects the social stratification is to measure the social differences between professional and amateur musicians in terms of time spent, money made, and the quality of their music practice. It seems clear that established professional musicians enjoy more freedom and have more agency in their music practice as well as non-musical side businesses in comparison to their amateur counterparts. This is the exact reason why music has become a much-desired career and why a singing competition show like *The Voice of China* has been a huge hit. The social division of the Chinese society is also greatly influenced by the geographical boundary created by the decades-old *hukou* system and the international migration of the Chinese population. People of agriculture origins, or ruralites, are still largely stereotyped and discriminated against in the contemporary society, even if they choose to relocate to cities. At the same time, recent years
have witnessed an increase of overseas populations moving back to work and live in China. The financial, social, and cultural achievements they obtained in their residence countries become their privileges, which further upgrade them into a higher social status in the roughly defined social ladder of the Chinese society.

Sociologist Yu Xie (2016) contends that social inequality in contemporary China is generated and maintained by 1) structural mechanisms such as *hukou* system, work units, kinship lineages, and geographic locations, 2) traditional political ideology that promotes merits-based inequality, and 3) the state-initiated economic development that allows a small number of people to get rich first. Although scholars believe that the inequality is unlikely to cause social unrest because institutional systems such as government policies and social network are able to moderate the potential social problems (Yu Xie & Zhou, 2014; Y. Yu Xie, 2016), the growing social divide revealed by contestants in the show still suggest an urgent concern for individuals in marginalized and discriminated social positions. Fortunately, the singing competition show not only reflects the social disparity but also offers a platform for people of different origins to communicate and interact with each other. Thus, amateur musicians perform in front of established professional musicians and receive feedback, training, and tips for life experiences. Contestants with limited music training communicate with those who have advanced musical knowledge and performing practices. In this sense, marginalized voices are made in the show and broadcast to a larger audience body. As quiet as these voices may be, they attempt to trigger more attention and concerns in the society. In the concluding chapter, I discuss how the different aspects of identities that I have explored so far intersect and interact with each other and contribute to the formation of lived experiences in Chinese society.
CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSION

As I was wrapping up this project in May 2018, Sing! China has launched the national and international search for Season 3. In the U.S., open auditions were held in Houston, New York, Las Vegas, and San Francisco, while the finale was held in Los Angeles on April 28, 2018. In Australasia, open auditions were organized and promoted by the local media and sponsors in big cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Brisbane, and Auckland. Similar auditions in Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan were also advertised and circulated on various social media platforms. At the same time in China, while the national search is in full swing, the identity of the fourth judge participating in this season, besides Jay Chou and newcomers Nicholas Tse and Li Jian, has remained unknown. In fact, having fans guess who will be the person has unabashedly become a promotion strategy, as the pre-auditions are being held in different cities. The official weibo account of the show highlighted a message posted on March 28, 2018, openly asking its followers to guess the identity of the “fourth mysterious judge.” Since Na Ying officially announced her departure from the show last year, media reports and fans are both widely assuming that the fourth judge will be a female in order to keep the gender ratio, despite the fact that the female judges have been far outnumbered in the show since the beginning.

Inviting Chou, Tse, and Li to the newest season seems to be sophisticatedly planned, as each

represents a different part of greater China: Chou from Taiwan, Tse from Hong Kong, and Li from the Mainland. Given the complicated connections between entertainment and politics in China as discussed by Wu (2017), such a move is not an easy one. The producers have to deal with a strained relationship with China’s regulator (Bai, 2015), a reciprocal relationship with participating celebrities, and a symbiotic relationship with the audiences with whom they “co-create, shape, and limit engagement with reality television” (Hill, 2017, p. 1). Thus, the show, as either *The Voice of China* or *Sing! China*, serves as the ideal venue to perceive these subtle and intertwined relationships, and more importantly, to demonstrate how different participants in the show articulate individual, collective, and national identities, challenge traditional social norms on aesthetic standards and gender roles, and negotiate class identity in a country where social stratification is increasingly widening.

In this project, I started with a critical discussion of the blind audition, the voting mechanism, and the music—the three pillars of the singing competition show, without which, the show would hardly be as attractive and successful as it has been. The blind audition creates an illusion of fairness for the viewers who fantasize a world of complete equality but only find the problematic aesthetic standards and the biased judgment prevalent and powerful. The voting system, designed to maintain the procedural function, hardly enacts any semblance of democracy but reinforces the power of a small group of privileged insiders who have a big say both in the show and in the entertainment industry. The hybridized music in the show demonstrates the music taste of the new generation of consumers and reflects the individual and collective
understanding of contemporary Chinese society via musical, lyrical, and instrumental languages. With such a critical analysis as background, I highlighted and explored three different aspects of identity—nationality, gender, and class—to understand how individuals and collectives made voices in the process of articulating, interrogating, and negotiating these identities by the use of music-related discourse.

First, I examined the reinforcement of the state-sponsored nationalism and patriotism (Darr, 2011) through sonic representations, rhetorical themes, and ethnic performances. In particular, Chapter Three’s analysis of lyrical meanings in two patriotic songs entitled “I Love You, China,” two nationalist rhetorics—Chinese Dream and root-seeking—and the performances and personal narratives of three ethnic contestants supports the overall argument that while the Party-state propagates nationalism and patriotism in a sophisticated way, participants are able to express individualized voices in the show that suggests a pluralism of the voice in China. Second, I discussed how gender plays a powerful role in the formation of voice diversity both in the show and in the larger society. Specifically, I explored how the traditional gender role that prescribes men and women in a hetero-familial relationship continues to subordinate and marginalize women in a patriarchal society, how the conventional gender norms that constrain each gender with limited social responsibilities continue to be the cause of gender imbalance in the popular music making and performing, and how the performances of several androgynous bodies and voices in the show indicate the loosening grip of the central government and a growing societal leniency towards non-normative gender representations, thus creating an environment to re-
conceptualize gender and re-evaluate gender roles in the new era. Third, voice diversity is made by individuals who are in the possession of or in need of various forms of social capital, by vaguely defined professional and amateur musicians and by contestants from geographically diverse and economically disparate social backgrounds. These polyphonic voices (Bakhtin, 1981) may not be able to represent the entire population but, as a contemporary popular cultural product, the show, as either The Voice of China or Sing! China, has made attempts to search for and present different voices, has created a space to allow these voices to be shaped and heard, and more importantly, has initiated the interaction and communication among these voices.

To highlight the three different identities in separate chapters is by no means to isolate them or to prioritize one among others. After all, any lived experiences are associated with multiple identities that are complicated and intertwined. In the West, feminist and anti-racist scholars employ intersectionality as the primary analytic tool to theorize identity and oppression (Nash, 2008). McCall (2005) considers the theory of intersectionality to grow out of a gender-and-race-based critique that fails to “account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection” (p. 1780). These neglected intersecting identities include gender, race, class, and nation, among others, that mutually construct one another, instead of being distinctive social hierarchies (Collins, 1998). Following this Western-originated theory, my concern in this project has been to identify and explore how certain social groups and individuals, with the intersection of multiple identities, are excluded, marginalized, and oppressed, in one way or another, in contemporary Chinese society. The six seasons of the singing competition show offer a prime site to understand
the dynamics of intersectionality in a situated context, inviting discourses of politics, 
(trans)nationality, ethnicity, gender, and class to operate in the embodied experience of its 
contestants, judges, and audiences (Chow, 2011).

As I have investigated in this study, all participants are subjects to a multiplicity of 
oppression, discrimination, and marginalization, variations of unequal treatments caused by 
institutional systems and social norms. Contestants come to the show to search for pure fairness 
but are manipulated to create an entertainment sensation. Under the controlled mechanism, 
contestants who lack normative physical attractiveness or do not meet expectations for television 
personalities (Bennett, 2010) become the obvious subjects who get eliminated quickly. Even if a 
few contestants with phenomenal voices are able to go to next rounds, the chances for them to 
survive and thrive in Chinese popular music market are low. For those who advance to the finale 
and who eventually become the champions of the show, they are still subjected to the controlled 
voting systems and, later, to the state-regulated, gender-biased, and class-stratified entertainment 
industry and the larger society. The overseas Chinese contestants also become the subjects of 
heavy political intervention, as they have to pledge allegiance to China by purposefully 
neglecting their foreignness. They are required to speak and sing in Chinese even though for 
some Chinese is not their mother tongue. Even with their best performance of Chineseness, they 
can hardly become the champion due to their foreign citizenship. The political intervention 
renders producers vulnerable as well, as Miao (2011) points out; they have to desperately seek to 
avoid state sanctions of politically controversial and incorrect content, while creatively
maintaining the entertaining aspects of Chinese TV. The show’s rhetorical themes of the Chinese Dream and root-seeking are the most effective maneuvers the producers have applied to express their intention and ambition to be in line with the ruling ideology while prying into personal narratives of dreams and root-seeking experiences.

The code of conduct of the entertainment industry, written or hidden, and the active political intervention in cultural production are not the only two institutional systems that subject individuals and different social groups in contemporary Chinese society. As China’s socialist market economy keeps deepening, economic inequality and the subsequent social inequality have become salient and powerful principles that engender oppression, exclusion, and discrimination. Contestants of financially and socially underprivileged origins are usually associated with a rural identity indicated by hukou status or the lower division of the hierarchically structured professions (Schulte, 2003) in Chinese society. They are particularly powerless in the face of political intervention and industrial manipulation due to their lack of awareness and agency. Their social disadvantages are often constructed as motivational stories that constitute the show’s grand narrative of political correctness, but the unequal treatments they receive in their daily life hardly draws serious attention in the entertainment media. Contestants of minoritized ethnic origins are another group of people subjected to economic and political institutions. As discussed in Chapter Three, although a series of inducement policies have been implemented to improve the political, economic, and social conditions of ethnic groups in the post-Mao era and ethnic images have become increasingly visible and active in popular media,
the national imagination of ethnic minorities is still based on a homogeneous (mis)understanding and political construction: they are represented as “others” who maintain the cultural remembrance of the country’s past, need the government’s care, financial aid, and political representation, and have limited agency to voice the subjectivity of their ethnic membership (Zhao & Postiglione, 2010). The words of the Tibetan female singer Cirenlaky from the second season of Sing! China have precisely substantiated this point. As the only female Tibetan and one of only a few female ethnic contestants in all six seasons of the show, Cirenlaky introduced herself as the lead singer of a band based in Beijing. At the end of the cheerful performance of a pop song “Poor but Happy” (2007), HongKongese Judge Eason Chen asked if she was familiar with his songs. She immediately said that young people in Tibet nowadays listen to music from everywhere and of various kinds of genres. This conversation reflects the ongoing stereotype of Tibetans—being only capable of performing their own ethnic music, being excluded and isolated from the modern world, and being subjected to the national and political misrepresentation.

Besides the institutional systems, contestants with subordinated identities are confronted with other unjust or prejudicial treatments. For example, female participants, including both contestants and judges, suffer from the patriarchal suppressions in forms of social norms and music practices. Female popular music performers are still largely confined to their roles as mother and wife rather than the role of professional musicians in Chinese society. They have to sacrifice their musical career at a certain point in life to fulfill their womanhood, wifehood, and motherhood, regardless of their previous efforts and achievements. If they happen to be
successful musicians, the chances are that their personal life may be considered as the opposite. The stories of the only two female judges in the show precisely confirm their subjectivity to the gender norms in current Chinese society. In regards to female contestants, although they actively participate in the show, their achievements are limited: only one champion in six seasons. The result may reflect the gender bias held by the predominately youth-driven popular music industry in which the intersections and dynamics between constructions of age and gender set another barrier to female musicians (Jennings & Gardner, 2012). A few non-normative gender personalities have been able to make their voices heard in the show, but living in a society that sees gender as a heterosexual construct and believes in conventional gender roles, they are marginalized and largely neglected. Their gender identities seem to be suppressed the most among others.

Contestants are not the only group who are subjected to various institutional systems and social norms. Although audiences have become more active and powerful in interpreting entertainment media texts as discussed by Wu (2017), their communications and activities are still closely and widely monitored and controlled by the central government. When I started the research for this study, I planned to incorporate audience analysis in this project by collecting data from a new commenting system danmu that allowed registered media viewers to leave impromptu and synchronous feedback when watching the show. Thus, the system has become a platform for free speech, rendering immediate censoring impossible. Being wary of the risk of circulating socially and politically inappropriate opinions, however, the Ministry of Culture has
made an announcement to strictly monitor those websites and to punish those that fail to filter and block the coarse language and offensive comments. In response to the official action, the *danmu* system was cancelled by the show and the previous comments were no longer available for this study. In this sense, not only were media viewers’ real voices institutionally controlled and muted, but as a critical culture scholar, my access to these data and my agency to study the voice was also greatly limited. Thus, I have to seek alternative paths to hear the voices of this study. In future extensions of this project, I plan to engage the audience community in subsequent seasons of the show, hoping to hear authentic voices by observing and participating in the watching community.

The discussion of intersectionality, foregrounded in all participants in the six seasons of a singing competition show in China, hopefully, can raise awareness of speaking against exclusions, marginalization, and discriminations and challenging institutions and social norms that have silenced many voices (Nash, 2008). As Meizel (2010) argues at the end of her book, “a form of light entertainment is, in fact, doing serious cultural work, and is a powerful tool in the process of deciding, and selling, who we are” (p. 218). It is also my hope that, in a larger view, this project has both revealed the significant role a franchised reality TV singing competition show plays in the daily life of ordinary Chinese people and has helped establish the credibility of contemporary popular cultural products as a site for negotiating internal social dynamics as well as a connection between Chinese society and the external world.

75 The official report was published on the website of the Ministry of Culture on December 3, 2014. See http://www.mcprc.gov.cn/whzx/bnsj/whscs/201412/t20141203_660668.htm
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