

# Can Pop Culture Really Bring About Social Gender Change in Chinese Society

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**Abstract:** With the popularity of the idol talent show in Chinese market, the size of the fan base has escalated and this has contributed to an awakening of the audience's aesthetic awareness. In order to study whether popular culture can be used as a positive social change tool to change audience's attitudes towards gender, and ultimately to an effect positive changes in gender culture in Chinese society. This article uses the methodology of digital ethnography to analyse the contestants with "gender temperament" in reality TV shows. It is positive to note that the gender diversity presented in the pop culture shows that gender culture for Chinese society is undergoing a positive change. However, many viewers are continuing to make discriminatory comments about the contestants with the "gender temperament", which indicate that gender stereotypes still exist.

**Keywords:** Social gender fluidity, Pop culture, Gender stereotypes, Masculinity, Gender temperament.

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## 1. Introduction

With the popularity of the idol talent show reality <Youth with You>, the variety market has thus started the first year of idol talent shows in China. The show recorded the process of 101 contestants learning to sing and dance under the training of celebrity mentors. The audience as judges are required to watch the contestants perform on stage and vote based on their performances, eventually selecting nine contestants to form an idol group to debut.

Under the circumstances that the idol market has experienced a spurt of development and intergenerational change, the upgrade of fan scale and the expansion of circle have promoted the awakening of aesthetic consciousness. The temperaments of "a more androgynous style for female" and "male have femininity style" displayed by some players have broken the traditional aesthetic standards, and audience is also looking forward to seeing a more diverse and open-minded image of the contestants.

Although, the presence of these temperaments challenges traditional notions of gender and offers the possibility of an assault on male hegemony. However, on the other hand, fluid gender temperaments have also sparked some controversy. Many viewers have made discriminatory remarks about contestants with these temperaments, suggesting that gender stereotypes still exist.

This essay uses the methodology of digital ethnography to analyse some contestants and some of the comments collected from the second and third seasons of <Youth With You>. The aim is to explore whether pop culture can be used as a positive social change tool to change viewers' attitudes and behaviours towards gender, and thus bring about a change in gender culture in China.

## 2. How Different Genders Temperament Arise in <Youthwith You>

The neutral agitation is a social phenomenon in which men dress as women or women present themselves as men. The neutral trend can be divided into two types, a feminine androgynous trend and a masculine androgynous trend.

### 2.1. Changes in femininity

The presence of gender-neutral contestants has subverted the standard image of girl's idol groups in the traditional gender system and reshaped viewers' perception of contemporary gender culture through television media.

With the rise of globalisation and the women's affirmative action movement in recent years, gender equality awareness has gradually become a consensus among the general public (Song & Hird, 2014, p.30). And the television media, as the most widespread and influential cultural product, can reflect the changing social reality through the content of its programmes, viewers' comments and so on (Geng & Derek, 2014, p.30).

Core features of post-feminism include an emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency, a resistance to interrogating structural gendered inequalities, and a renewed focus on the female body as a site of liberation (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p.153). As a result, the diverse portrayal of women in talent shows caters to the aesthetic expectations of different fan bases. The female idols are no longer stereotypical 'models', but to a certain extent, it breaks through the patriarchal male aesthetic standards of the past and shows an awakening of female subjectivity and women's pursuit of their own aesthetic independence. This 'neutral' image also avoids the danger of shifting the female body into a male 'sex object'.

In contrast to the traditional image of a slim, good-looking female group idol, the cast of <Youth With You 2> has invited women who do not fit these criteria to participate. For example, a 23-year-old girl named Xiai Shangguani, who is slightly chubby and wears a "boy's haircut", but she has gained considerable popularity and fan support because of her intense dance.



**Figure 1.** Photo of Xiai Shangguan

In addition, Yuxin Liu, who won the title in <Youth With You 2>, also displays physical features and gender temperament that differ from the female norm. Her face is well-defined, and she has also been appearing on the show with short hair and refusing to wear the show's uniform of skirts in favour of trouser suits. Costume as a non-verbal symbol, conveys a specific aesthetic concept while shaping the visual image. Liu's refusal to wear a skirt in favour of trousers also reinforces her aesthetic distinction from the other contestants. Her image overturns the standard image of a girl group under the traditional gender system of sweet looks and long hair. This androgynous temperament nevertheless sparked a cult following who finally supported Liu won the championship in this program and became the center of the idol group.



**Figure 2.** Photo of Yuxin Liu

Both Yuxin Liu and Xiai Shangguan construct images of females that to some extent deconstruct traditional stereotypes of femininity and subvert single aesthetic standards. The personalities of these two contestants convey the spirit of individualism and the emancipation of the female body on the stage, while the TV media can provide the audience with "an apparently intimate, face-to-face "indirect contact" with the performers". Through this contact, pop culture can shape viewers' perceptions of others, which inevitably has some positive impact on modern women's self-perceptions and contemporary gender culture (Ganetz, 2011,

p.415).

## 2.2. Changes in masculinity

While the traditional male-dominated conception of gender in society sets a set of standards for female image, it also establishes a set of norms for the image of men themselves. Connell (1995) defined the hegemonic male reflects the dominant position of men and the subordinate position of women in a patriarchal society. Men who are endowed with instrumental characteristics must be strong, independent and brash. In terms of character, men tend to be aggressive. Because China is heavily influenced by Confucianism, this culture gives men more respect, privilege and status ((Wallis & Shen, 2018, p.377).

However, Anderson (2012) argues that the image of hegemonic masculinity should not be static and that masculinity should be 'inclusive'. When looking at China, with the advent of modernity, the country is undergoing a cultural transformation, and both China's neoliberal policies and its market-driven reforms have considerably enriched the two-dimensional masculinity norms (Louie, 2016, p187). So that definitions of masculinity are being reimagined. Specifically, the concept of masculinity in China has undergone significant social change and it is now constructed with an increasing appreciation of a new synthesis that embraces a blend of gentleness and strength. And with the context-appropriate display of confidence, calmness, coolness and warmth (Louie, 2016, p188). Even if these traits and the emotions displayed are more close to femininity in nature, they do not pose a threat to men's public identity.

For instance, Yinghao Sun, a contestant in <Youth With You 3> who has gained many fans. He has stood out from the more than 100 contestants with an image that differed from the traditional rigid male norm. Sun's appearance is a prime example of a male with femininity style. He has a soft look, a medium-length hair and penchant for make-up. This image completely rebels against societal expectations of traditional male roles that consist of an athletic body, virility and careerism (Ganetz, 2011, p.405). This gender fluidity has an alienating and spectacle effect on fans, which helps to bridge the gap between male and female genres.



**Figure 3.** Photo of Yinghao Sun

Furthermore, Professor Harrison (2008) points out that men have begun to re-evaluate their appearance and redefine consumer fashion and product style. In the new media age of consumer society, the rise of contemporary feminine

consciousness has naturally brought about a revolution in the 'anti-male gaze' (Patterson & Elliott, 2002, p.234). Under the impetus of consumerism, females whose economic status is gradually enhanced raise their subjective consciousness, which has led to a confrontation with the male gaze. This confrontation dismantled the power of the male gaze and the establishment of women's own discursive subjectivity, resulting in the phenomenon of "male consumption" and the female gaze.

As the main audience for the show <Youth with You> is women, and the success or failure of the contestants to join in the idol group also mainly depends on the female audience. Therefore, females are finally in the position of the gaze and transforming men with their own aesthetics. Not only are the 'urban pretty boy' images of men being presented as a commodity to be consumed, but the contestants, who are dominantly masculine in appearance and also have a 'soft' personality are also being chosen by female viewers. These diversified images have become the primary entrance for female audiences to choose "male appearance" variety shows.

Xingxing Duan is another contestant who joined in <Youth With You 3>. His sunny and wild exterior appearance features have distinct hegemonic masculine characters that provide female viewers with objects of personal fantasy. In the talent show, he has won praise from fans for his "understanding" older brother persona. This combination of 'domineering' appearance and warmth of character is a reflection of the concept of masculinity being changed when in the face of changing social order. When females look at male body symbols, the contrast of the "female gaze" satisfies the pleasure of the female audience to a certain extent (Rebecca, 2009, p.362). This helps women to establish their self-awareness and self-identity, shifts the critical discourse from men to women and helps to break the patriarchal gender order.



Figure 4. Photo of Xingxing Duan

### 3. Talent Shows Stereotypes About Gender Are Still Deeply Rooted

However, the domesticated aesthetic environment of a patriarchal society and the capitalist ideology of profit above all else still make the construction of a diverse female image difficult (Anderson, & Ferris, 2016, p.12). The "gender fluidity" and "female gaze" phenomena presented in reality TV shows also make it difficult to break the equality of gender in real society.

### 3.1. Reasons of why gender fluidity is so popular

Some experts believe that the popularity of "neutral style" is not due to a change in gender stereotypes, but to the fact that consumerism has been growing in China's large and medium-sized cities and has had a profound impact on people's daily lives, which is stimulating people's desires. As the audience for reality TV shows is mostly young people, they gain recognition by supporting these types of contestants. This is why talent shows hope to use this 'neutral style' to gain the consumption and support of young people.

At the same time, reality shows that promote the 'independent female spirit' are a contemporary product of China's maturing entertainment industry. These shows are still essentially a marketing exercise that follows a script and does not represent a progression in Chinese society in terms of gender (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2019, p.11). For example, the popularity of some contestants' neutral style is due to the fact that their neutral expression easily attracts the attention of the audience, which helps them stand out from a lot of contestants. But this does not mean that "neutral style" itself is welcome as well as perception in society.

### 3.2. Appearance is still the way to judge girls with "neutral" style

Secondly, in <Youth With You 2>, the crowd continues to judge girls on their appearance (Hentschel, Heilman, & Peus, 2019). It is hard to see how fans would go after an ordinary looking girl contestant, because this kind of talent show is the world of 'young beauty'. These ordinary looking contestants are girls who no longer arouse male sexuality and their appearances in the show are very limited. An example in <Youth With You 2> is short-haired girls with blurred gender identities such as Yuxin Liu and KeYan Lu have enjoyed the benefits of androgynous due to their superior looks, and have gained a great deal of popularity, thus successfully have become one of the members of the idol group.

Yu Zhang and Xinyu Wang who keep a neutral style" as well are not as popular as the two girls mentioned above. Although they are clearly strong in their own right, such as having great singing skills, the audience doesn't care about the androgynous style they display. The reason for this is that they don't have the glamour bonus that comes with their good looks. It is clear that only good-looking people are entitled to cross the gender paradigm and become fan favourites, while ordinary looking neutral girls are attacked for not looking like females. There was no shortage of attacks on Weibo about the appearance of other 'neutral' contestants. Some netizens commented on Xinyu Wang like "How can you debut as such a plain girl?" This phenomenon shows that women are still the object of visualization, and that the aesthetic of "white and thin" still divides women into various grades and ranks.



**Figure 5.** Photo of Xinyu Wang

Therefore, when ordinary looking female contestants choose to portray themselves in a 'neutral' style, they seem to be escaping traditional gender stereotypes, but in fact they are still enforcing a single gender symbol.

### 3.3. Malicious comments about men

From the perspective of the masses, there is some understanding and support for the androgynous style for female but there is a clear resistance to men with feminine features, even though they still identify as men. <Youth With You 3> has a large audience base in terms of "consumption of the boys with good-looking", but it has also garnered a lot of criticism. Many people believe that most of the contestants lack masculinity, which is not conducive to men finding their own position in society.

The hidden meaning behind such comments is that men should not wear make-up, men should not be feminine, and men who love make-up and are feminine are not glorious because their images go against the image of masculinity (Hentschel et al., 2019). And some people are worried that the existence of an appearance like Yinghao Sun's will bring down the aesthetics of Chinese men and exacerbate the "male crisis" in society as a whole.

The reason for these comments may be that China's patriarchal ideology has been deeply rooted, making "machismo" still a serious problem (Louie, 2016, p.138). Conservatism is still the dominant mentality in the country. As the phenomenon of 'neutrality' is not a mainstream culture, it is contrary to the mainstream gender culture that most television media are trying to promote and disseminate, which is the hegemonic culture of men. This is why masculine dressing with feminine features is more likely to be rejected by the public.

## 4. Conclusion

It is undeniable that in talent shows, the characteristics of gender diversity under pop culture show that China's gender culture is undergoing some changes, and these changes are contributing to the subversion of traditional sexual role behaviours. In the meantime, female viewers are also trying to subvert traditional sexist ideologies by reversing role behaviours. Yet the programmes are still bound by traditional gender stereotypes. The shows continue to reinforce sexist ideologies by appealing to notions of female images based on

sexual objectification, such as good looking and slim. That is to say, women are still under the male gaze. Take a broad view, China still has heavy responsibilities to achieve equality between men and women. According to Liberal feminists, women's subordinate status is rooted in a series of customs and legal restrictions, which hinders women's success in the public sphere (Enyew & Mihrete, 2018, p.60). China needs to introduce new laws and more extensive education to mitigate women's marginalization, so as to further promote the awakening of women's subjective consciousness.

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