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## 'Democratic entertainment' commodity and unpaid labor of reality TV: a preliminary analysis of China's *Supergirl*

Miaoju JIAN and Chang-de LIU

**ABSTRACT** *China's Supergirl, a popular reality talent show, is fairly similar to American Idol in the sense that it created new forms of media commodities as well as new forms of labor. Because of this, the entertainment industry has been able to generate profits in China's growing broadcasting and, up to now underdeveloped, music markets. By analyzing both the production and consumption of Supergirl, this paper describes the economic development of reality TV in China. We also analyze how this talent show produced a flexible and localized commodity. This paper suggests that a different perspective is needed in order to understand the ways in which the organizers steer and manipulate the audience participation. Volunteer and unpaid labor is created by promoting the 'TV Cinderella myth'. Fans and participants are symbolically paid in a form of 'dream-fulfillment'. People, otherwise accustomed to a Communist regime, are now charmed by a certain amount of apparent democracy that is displayed during the singing contests. This paper coins the above mentioned process as being a specific commodity of 'democratic entertainment' in China.*

**KEYWORDS:** reality TV, unpaid labor, democratic entertainment, *Supergirl*

Since the year 2000, a new wave of reality TV has been spreading in East Asian societies as well as throughout the European and North American societies where it originated. It is said to represent 'a fresh alternative program type' in East Asian societies (Keane *et al.* 2007: 143). In China, *Supergirl*, an *American Idol*-type TV contest, was viewed by more than 400 million people in 2005, making it one of the most successful shows in Chinese television history. Due to the success of *Supergirl*, there are numerous discussions focused on its social, cultural, economic, political, and even gender identity implications for China. The primary focus of this article is the economic model, without ignoring the deep social and cultural issues, such as democratic participation, brought on by this program. We do not denounce or celebrate the cultural or political implications; instead we explore them within the new economic structure generated by this program.

Reality TV – such as China's *Supergirl* – is not only another popular TV show, but also represents a whole new form of media commodity and labor. Reality TV's commodity chain makes full use of a multimedia platform, including TV, phone lines, and the internet. With the aid of integrated media technologies, this type of program can make money from sponsorship revenues, cellular text messages, and even the continuous exploitation of talent. In the case study of *Supergirl*, this article suggests that the success of this program creates new forms of media commodities as well as new forms of labor. On one hand, the new media commodities are customized products that are produced in a flexible and localized way. On the other hand, the customized products have to involve the consumers in the production processes. Consumers are active participants and volunteer to do extra labor. They even pay more than usual to get a product that satisfies their personal desires.

Furthermore, comparing *Supergirl* to the western Idol format, we can detect some major differences. On the surface, the formula of *Supergirl* is fairly identical, even though the rhetoric of viewer democracy does seem more appealing than its counterparts in Western countries. *Supergirl* claims that it is manufacturing an idol 'from among ordinary people with the assistance of ordinary people' (Keane *et al.* 2007: 129). It is labeled as the 'ordinary idol phenomenon' (*pingmin oushiang*). This fairy tale concept is very attractive and effective in a country where voting for politicians is not commonly practiced. In addition, there are significant economic and cultural considerations (Keane *et al.* 2007: 130). In China and Hong Kong's TV industry, the cost of acquiring an international Idol license is considered much too high. Additionally, the global Idol format faced problems of cultural compatibility; the TV station had to be careful to reject any overt inanity or ridiculous attitude toward performers. As a result, *Supergirl's* success relies on a more localized media industry and a more contextualized ideology. On the practical level, new communication technologies are used to enhance the interaction between viewers and the program. On the symbolic level, by promoting concepts and ideas about 'democratizing television' and 'being yourself,' this program successfully transforms the contestants and viewers into a new form of unpaid labor. In other words, media convergence and synergy, as well as the flexible and customized production of post-Fordism, should be taken into account when analyzing the triumph of China's *Supergirl*.

In a nutshell, contrary to western countries the success of *Supergirl* seems to represent a new profitable model within China's growing broadcasting environment as well as within the developing music industry. Nevertheless, the producers of this reality TV appear to have followed a similar business logic to their counterparts in the west. They reduced costs by exploiting the labor of contestants and audiences willing to 'work' for 'invisible' payments based on an ideology. First, this paper describes the economic context during the development of reality TV in China. Second, we shall analyze the new form of commodity chains originated by *Supergirl*. Finally, this paper argues that such talent shows are based on relatively cheap labor geared exclusively at the TV industry. These voluntary laborers are symbolically paid in 'dream-fulfillment' within the apparent democracy of a singing contest. We will call it a 'democratic entertainment' commodity.

### **Economic context of the emergence of reality TV**

#### *The emergence of reality TV in the West: crisis of TV and record industries*

'Reality TV' is an umbrella term for a number of programming trends that have rapidly expanded since the late 1980s. At first, reality programs were viewed as a cheaper type of programming, created to fill previously vacant hours of network or cable schedules (Raphael 2004; Quелlette and Murray 2004). The most common characteristics of reality TV include: non-professional performers and un-scripted content, as well as behind-the-scene revelations of the real social lives of contestants through strategically placed, hidden cameras. Despite the unambitious start of reality TV, the huge success of *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, and *American Idol* in Europe, the UK and America since 2000 has created a wave of reality programs increasingly being considered as an emerging business model in the digital age, or post-Fordist capitalism (Magder 2004; Andrejevic 2004; Jenkins 2006: 59–92).

The change of reality programs' role resulted from the crisis of the TV industry and record industry. Since the 1990s, the broadcasting industry has faced a thornier economic environment and increased competition within the expanded channels and multiple distribution outlets, which is a consequence of the deregulation climate in broadcasting policies and the boom of new technologies in an age of media convergence. Compounding this problem is the increasingly fragmented audience, the rapidly rising cost of 'above-the-line' labor,

and the dilution of advertising revenues. Moreover, the advertisers and media purchasing and planning companies also suffer from the endless game of audience hide-and-seek. These concerns grow out of the diversified selection of smaller niche markets and the use of new technologies, which enable more and more consumers to skip commercials. Under financial pressure, the TV networks, ad agencies, and advertisers 'sit down collectively and cooperatively to come up with a solution' in an integrative way (Jenkins 2006: 67).

Another factor stimulating the emergence of reality TV is the crisis of the record industry. After about 15 years of expansion in sales following the introduction of the compact disc, music corporations all over the world claim that the music industry has been encountering a serious crisis due to illegal digital piracy through peer-to-peer technology, which became popular in the late 1990s (Leyshon *et al.* 2005: 177–180). As Leyshon *et al.* pointed out, the problems facing the music industry have not suddenly manifested overnight, or even in response to online digital file exchange, but rather have accumulated over time in response to 'a set of broader cultural forces that have changed the role of music within society' (Leyshon *et al.* 2005: 181). That means the music industry has recognized the need for a wholesale reorganization toward a new business model and a reconfigured music industry to fit the changed social and cultural value of music. In fact, the music industry has indeed utilized various strategies to maintain its profits. The management of recording companies have adjusted their organizational division of labor so that, like their counterparts in the film industry, the managers in the music industry now work as independent producers in charge of particular projects (Hesmondhalgh 2002: 166). Furthermore, the music industry has extended its territory so that the 'music business' is not confined to the 'record business' only. For large music corporations, the value of music can be increased by linking it with other cultural products and advertising. The result tends to be the cross-selling of music, as well as the merger between music and other media conglomerates. The synergy of music-media conglomerates helps both the sale of media products and the promotion of records and music artists (Leyshon *et al.* 2005; Kusek and Leonhard 2005; Jenkins 2006: 79). Therefore, the financial benefit has reshaped the façade of music products as well as the landscape of the music industry in this 'post-record' era. As the music industry faces a crisis due to the widespread usage of digital technologies, various types of music marketing tools have been developed in recent years, including pay-per-download websites, membership-fee streaming services, and cooperating with TV to produce reality programs, which is the focus of this paper.

Magder identifies three unique reality TV business strategies: the increased use of product placement, the expansion of merchandising tie-ins, and the extensive use of new interactive technologies outside the confines of the TV set (Magder 2004: 148–151). Following his observations, we can conclude that the crisis of the record business and the TV industry seems to reflect a turning point within the larger 'cultural industries' (Hesmondhalgh 2002). The crisis of the individual media industry provided an ideal window of opportunity for the collaboration of cross-media and entertainment industries. This could be seen as a pre-context for the generation and rejuvenation of a new 'reality pop program' wave, such as *American Idol* and *Pop Idol*. In such a context, the spawning and spreading of the reality TV genre has been considered as 'a cost-cutting solution' as well as 'a new business model' (Raphael 2004; Magder 2004). This has had the effect of reshaping the contemporary television culture.

#### *The rise of Supergirl in China: a different economic context*

*Supergirl* is a Chinese version of the *American Idol* talent show. It was conceived by Hunan Satellite Television (HSTV) in 2004 and was a huge success in 2005. The *Supergirl* phenomenon has attracted lots of viewers and has created a successful business model for live singing

contests. In 2005, *Supergirl* created (what is considered) high ratings of about 10% of the market share. This means that it was number one during a peak broadcasting time slot in China's TV programming (Liu and Wu 2006: 87; Xu H. 2006: 44). In that year, *Supergirl* attracted more than 150,000 applicants to preliminary auditions alone. One of the reasons for its success was that viewers were able to participate in the judging process by voting for their favorite contestants through SMS messages. In this way, the producers utilized ordinary people who were able to influence the unfolding and outcome of each episode. The prize for the winners was a record contract and guaranteed management by e-e Media (Tianyu media). Of course, e-e Media cooperated with HSTV to produce this program. After producing three successful seasons between 2004 and 2006, *Supergirl*, HSTV and e-e Media jointly created an alternative version in 2007, which they named *Happyboy*. To this day, e-e Media has signed over 100 artists/talents from *Supergirl* and *Happyboy*. Thirty-nine albums and three singles were also released (e-e Media n.d.). With the success of *Supergirl* in 2005, more than 20 copycat programs were allowed on the airwaves by China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (Sarf) (Liu and Wu 2006: 212). Table 1 lists the popular star-making shows spread out in China since 2004. Such programs also describe the rising trend of localized reality TV in China.

The economic factors fostering the rapid growth of reality TV in China are different from those in Western countries. The emergence of Chinese reality TV mainly responds to the needs of commercial broadcasters and record companies. As a result of an economic boom after the government's reform and opening-up policies, Chinese mass media have experienced a golden age of market expansion. Advertising expenditure on mass media increased steadily as China's GDP grew and the size of the media audience expanded in the late 1980s. In the 1990s, the Chinese TV industry became the biggest mass media with its advertising income exceeding the newspaper industry's. Moreover, the size of the Chinese cable television market reached 114 million homes. From 1998 to 2003, the total broadcasting time on Chinese television increased by 252% (Lai 2006: 44; Su 2006: 24; Zhang H. 2005: 30). The lifting of the ban on foreign satellite channels and the government's permission for television commercialization and conglomeration also led to the dramatic change in the TV industry in China. It became a lucrative and competitive market during the last decade (Lai 2006; Su 2006). While US and European broadcasters suffered the effects of a market slump and compensated by using reality TV as a strategy to reduce production costs and generate profits from product placement, the Chinese broadcasting industry employed this genre of TV programming as a new entertainment, attracting large audiences in its dramatically expanding market.

**Table 1.** Popular talent shows in China since 2004

Program title	TV network	Since year	Content
<i>Dreaming China</i>	CCTV, Economy Channel	2004	Talent contest
<i>Myshow</i>	Dragon TV	2004	Talent contest
<i>Super Juvenile</i>	Shan Xi Satellite	2005	Kid's talent contest
<i>My Hero</i>	Dragon TV	2006	Talent contest, only for males
<i>Happyboy</i>	Hunan Satellite	2007	The male version of <i>Supergirl</i>
<i>Matchlove</i>	Jiang Su Satellite	2007	Talent contest for matching the male and female talents
<i>Celebrity Coach</i>	Jiang Su Satellite	2007	Talent contest but adding a celebrity as the coach



Political control, albeit with competitive strategies, resulted in the development of reality TV in China. On the one hand, the Chinese Communist Party still held power by controlling political opinions in the mass media. On the other hand, a governmental television group, the CCTV, retained a dominant position in broadcasting news, acquiring 60% of market share (Feng 2004; Lai 2006; Zhang H. 2005: 32). As a consequence, many provincial television stations concentrated on entertainment programs, rather than news, in order to compete with CCTV. A survey conducted in 2003 demonstrated that CCTV and provincial television stations had a fairly equal share of ratings in the national market. HSTV had the biggest provincial share consisting of 7.52%. Entertainment programs' broadcasting time had expanded to over 20% between 2002 and 2003 (Zhang H. 2005: 36).

Reality TV became another possible business model for the lesser developed Chinese music industry. It then encountered an even more demanding challenge when it had to deal with piracy. According to IFPI reports, the amount of pirated materials reached 85% of the total Chinese record market. Another survey shows that, in 2004, the revenue from sales of legal records was estimated to be one ninth of the revenue from illegal copies (IFPI 2006; Liu 2006: 38). As a consequence, the Chinese music industry became eager to seek another approach to generating profits. Cooperating with the TV stations' talent shows became essential for record companies (Liu 2006: 45–46).

This new socio-economic context contributed to the uniqueness of *Supergirl*. HSTV, owned by the local government, eventually became market-oriented television, basing its niche on a national scale due to the aggressive nature of commercial and marketing operations. As a government-operated television network, the pioneering work of HSTV has been to establish e-e Media in order to develop the new business model. The ruling party owned HSTV and thus profited from the management of the *Supergirl* stars. They also benefited from brands as well as records and concerts afterwards. Meanwhile, arising from an agricultural province in central China, HSTV also strongly identified itself as entertainment television for 'the common people'. This coup effectively distinguishes HSTV from the politically oriented CCTV in Beijing. It was also very different from the fashionable and wealthy Dragon TV in Shanghai (Zou and Huang 2007: 92). Because of this, the president of Hunan Broadcasting Group, Wei Wen-bin, was able to position *Supergirl* as 'a karaoke for nationwide people' (Huang 2006: 248). In the official book *Behind the Scene of Supergirl*, the general manager of HSTV, Ouyang Chang-lin, referred to *Supergirl* as a 'new entertainment economy'. He argued that such an economy is driven by 'the common people, by the interaction type formatting, by the diversified profit model and by the utilization of convergent new media' (Liu and Wu 2006: 4). In another words, *Supergirl* generated a remarkable success in China's media market. This inspired the whole media industry not only in China but also in worldwide enterprises who were interested in China's huge but socially specific market.

### **New forms of commodity: selling 'democratic entertainment'**

#### *The commodity chains of Supergirl*

For advertisers, program producers, and record companies, *Supergirl* is not just another popular TV show but represents a whole new form of customized production in which viewers are able to choose those contestant(s) they like most by voting. Through interactive technologies, this program has created new forms of music commodities and has formed a new 'reality TV/music industry/cellular phone companies' enterprise. By using and integrating digital technologies with reality TV, the producer is also able to create a popular program that specific audience groups want to watch. Consequently, the program is an 'open' rather than a 'closed' text for both producer and audience. For the viewers of *Supergirl*, the

commodity they consume is not the 'finished images' but the 'voting/production process' of the singing contest. According to the rules of the contest, the viewers had the final say in the choice of the winning contestants.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, this program combined broadcasting, telecommunication and the internet into a multiple-faceted platform for the audience to enjoy at will. The program sells spots for product placement to advertisers and also shares profits with telecommunication companies by encouraging viewers to vote through mobile phones. As a result of this media convergence, the program benefits from a kind of media 'synergy' or '*Supergirl* enterprise.'

Like traditional television programs, *Supergirl* has successfully attracted many advertisers. In 2005, the advertising fee for 15 seconds of *Supergirl* reached RMB 112,500, higher than that of the prime-time programs on CCTV. The annual advertising income in 2005 was estimated at RMB 40 million (Bao 2005; Wang X. 2005). Moreover, Mengniu Dairy, one of the three biggest milk companies in China, bought the rights to put its trade mark on the right corner of the TV screen throughout the duration of the contests. The income generated from this sole sponsor was estimated at RMB 14 million (Liu and Wu 2006: 63).<sup>2</sup>

Another 'gold mine' is the voting that takes place through cellular phone text messaging. In China, sending a text message costs about 1 RMB dollar. *Supergirl* contestants are able to attract an astonishing number of text message votes. In the week of the 2005 Best Five round, each contestant received 500,000 votes on average. Li Yu-chun, the 2005 Champion, had 3.5 million votes in total, and Zhou Bi-chang, the runner-up in the 2005 Final, had 3.2 million votes (Lai 2005). As one vote means one dollar, the two *Supergirls* had created a remarkable profit for mobile phone companies and the television station. In 2005, Hunan Television generated more than RMB 20 million from text messaging (Bao 2005; Wang X. 2005) (see Table 2).

In addition to the text message voting, online downloading of mobile phone ringtones of *Supergirl* songs also benefits cellular phone companies and the music industry. A rough estimation by one online company claimed that *Supergirl* songs constituted about one third of the total amount of mobile phone downloads (Lai 2005). The Chinese domain name of Zhou Bichang is registered by an online figure-message and mobile phone ringtone company, because the company owner is convinced that names of super girls are absolutely positive for business.

In fact, *Supergirl* has created a new type of 'reality TV/telecommunication/Internet/music industry' enterprise. Wang Pung, the President of e-e Media, disclaimed that the model of *Supergirl* is a media platform for various industries to generate profits (Yang 2005). e-e Media has tried to promote the *Supergirl* trademark for other goods. For instance, the price of a T-shirt with Li Yu-chun's picture is as expensive as RMB 50 dollars (Lai 2005). This illustrates how popular *Supergirls* are.

In a nutshell, HSTV, e-e Media and the Mengniu Dairy Company created a solid complex of *Supergirl's* productions. This included the original program, *Supergirl*, and many spin-offs. HSTV profited from the advertising, as well as from sponsor fees and text messages. e-e media profited from the artist's contract and everything generated by the spin-offs, plus whatever benefits came from the official website, and so on. Mengniu Dairy not only sponsored the program but profited from the name *Supergirl* that was put on their

**Table 2.** Sources of income from *Supergirl* (2005)

Advertising	RMB 40 million
Sponsors	RMB 14 million
Text message	RMB 20 million

new yogurt bottle. The sales of the Mengniu yogurt drink more than tripled, from 800 million to RMB 2700 million, in 2005 (Liu and Wu 2006: 67). The profit value generated by *Supergirl* was estimated to be RMB 766 million (Liu and Wu 2006: 209). In other words, the collective of those three companies cooperated to give birth to *Supergirl* into a world comprising multiple forms of commodity.

#### *Democratic entertainment as the 'use value' of Supergirl*

There are many observers who relate the success of *Supergirl* with the need for democracy in China. They believe *Supergirl* represents a starting point in obtaining the opinion of ordinary people. In fact, *Supergirl* has introduced Chinese to the concept of voting for the first time. Voting by themselves and for themselves seems to signal a possible future practice for democratic elections (Madden 2006; Macartney 2006; Barboza 2006; Wu 2005; Xu S. 2006). In other words, the phenomenon of *Supergirl* could arouse democratic dreams for the residents of this politically centralized country.

Instead of emphasizing the possible political repercussions of *Supergirl's* voting scheme, this paper suggests that this seemingly democratic voting process just represents an underlining operation of *Supergirl*. According to van Zoonen's creative articulation, fan communities around identical entertainment 'genres' share several similarities with the political constituencies (van Zoonen 2004). Audience participation in such programs utilize an interactive format that fulfills the desire of audiences 'for three indispensable but currently marginal dimensions of the political culture'. These are: 'transparency and authenticity; interactivity and control; and respect for diverse epistemologies' (van Zoonen 2004: 41). In China, for example, the political system is not a democratic one, yet the producers of these reality programs offer a form of virtual democracy to their more than willing audiences. This fancitized democracy is achieved, to a certain degree, through the individual's participation in talent shows.

In our opinion, *Supergirl* simply includes the basic elements of democracy: namely, voting and a vague feeling of becoming the masters of their own destiny. But, in fact, in order to vote one must pay money. Also, in order to be your own master, you must perform unpaid labor. Democracy here is only an articulated feeling and desire to act on one's emotional involvement in the program while having some control on its course. Democracy becomes a commodity consumed and produced by the audiences themselves. At the same time, it creates the pleasure of entertainment. It is a simulated democracy as well as an *entertainment democracy*.

A symbolic but entertainment democracy is created in two ways. First, due to the format of reality TV, *Supergirl* embraces a 'Superstar out, ordinary people in' spirit. In a country where the college education level is still less than 5%, HSTV positions itself as accessible for the masses, not for the elite. It emphasizes that the silent majority of 80% will be the key to the success of the localized entertainment industry (Liu and Wu 2006: 96–97). Therefore, from the low qualifications needed during preliminary auditions to the voting that invites all viewers to join in, *Supergirl* embodies a 'democratization of opportunities' (Qin S. 2005: 19). The equal and open chances of accessing this program promote a fantasy appeal. In other words, it democratizes celebrities, or democratizes television. An advertising company's vice-general manager in Beijing even stated that the strategy to select cities to hold the five Division Contests is also meaningful. He explained,

The five cities where *Supergirl* holds the Division Contests are Changsha, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Shenyang and Chengdu, without Shanghai and Beijing.<sup>3</sup> What does it mean for all of you? There are 1.2 billion people in China. It is definitely difficult for one to stand out among others, especially for the girls who are from the secondary cities. *Supergirl* just seems to provide a fair and equitable arena to make your dreams come true. (Wang X. 2005)



In other words, *Supergirl* represents a chance for girls from small cities, not from the big ones, to become nationwide celebrities. It is the ordinary people, not the professional singers/actors/superstars who are able to perform on TV. Utilizing such a contrast, *Supergirl* successfully appeals to ordinary people. The *Supergirl* director, Wang Ping, also adroitly adopted an 'ordinary idol' strategy. According to the executive director of *Supergirl*, Hong Tao, 'Wang reminded us that the make up and attire for *Supergirl* must reflect the nature of a young girl. They must be as plain as common people rather than full of splendor like a superstar' (Interview by author, 12 March 2008). With a slogan that expresses 'Dare to sing and don't be afraid of shame', *Supergirl* opened the stage for common people to show themselves and sing in public (Bai 2005; Lin 2005). It successfully democratizes the usually unattainable TV stage as well as celebrity status. This is at least true in a symbolic sense.

Secondly, *Supergirl* also promotes a spirit of 'Be the master of your own life, your own happiness'. Relying on a talent search format and viewer voting, *Supergirl* not only democratizes fame but also democratizes the production process on TV. In order to generate active participation, *Supergirl* must empower the audience by making them feel like masters. Hong Tao pointed out that the appointment of 'judges from the mass' in live contests is what differentiates *Supergirl* from the *American Idol*. In other words, these judges can play a larger part in the contest and are not limited to voting for the final winner. 'That's why the winners of *American Idol* usually depend on their singing talent but the winners of *Supergirl* depend on their affinity to the audience' (Interview by author, 12 March 2008). The thematic songs and slogans of *Supergirl* continuously promote this kind of feeling. Obvious examples are 'Just sing it, sing it great!' and 'I am master of my own happiness', which are used to encourage the viewer to vote for their idols (*United Evening News* 2005).

As some have observed, this may be the first time that audiences have been able to produce their own TV content in China (Macartney 2006; Wang Z. 2005), and believe that *Supergirl* accomplishes the unrealized desire for having a vote in China. Furthermore, it also represents an emerging identity economy for the new generation (Chang 2007). This article argues that such symbolic democracy, namely expressing one's identity on TV by voting, and speaking out for oneself, heavily parallels the customized production process of *Supergirl*. But consumers should not be fooled; the consequences of those votes are an illusion. This is just show business and, according to one manager of HSTV, it is a misunderstanding by the media from the West to think that the show's production has anything to do with politics (Xu S. 2006). Rather, this program simply sells an identity product to entertain fans. It is not real politics, but a democracy that is realized in a process in which audiences literally consume the show.

According to the vice president of e-e Media, Wang Ke, the albums generated by *Supergirl* or *Happyboy* will be released as soon as the final winner is chosen. The 2007 compilation album from *Happyboy*, including the 13 contestants, was published with 13 different cover versions. 'The fans of different contestants can buy the version illustrated by his/her supported singer. Some fans bought the whole set of 13 versions of the same album. The record becomes a memento more than a vehicle for music', states Wang Ke (Interview by author, 12 March 2008).

Just like Andrejevic pointed out before, the economic model of reality TV characterizes an interactive commerce. That is, 'viewers/producers provide the content which adds value to the program/product which is then repackaged and sold back to them' (Andrejevic 2002: 261). Such a customized product prompts that viewers pay more (by voting) and do extra labor (design the content), but paradoxically, audiences are also empowered by such a process. All the pleasure from such consumption is that '*Supergirl* gave people a chance to show their feelings' (Macartney 2006: 41).

The new economy of *Supergirl* comes not only from producing a customized reality TV program. Nor is *Supergirl* just a new commodity for music consumers. This program allows

viewers to practice democracy, although superficially, through entertainment. The success of *Supergirl* can also be considered as a new economy of entertainment democracy.

### **New labor**

The production of reality TV follows a basic rule of capitalism: to reduce the production cost while expanding the consumer market. Furthermore, this economic logic can be viewed as a rather post-Fordist, flexible, and capitalist way. By placing consumers in a role where they are involved in the process of production, reality TV also promotes a set of ideologies that are meant to attract and keep large audiences. This is the win-win rhetoric of the most popular and profitable reality TV genre, the reality pop program or talent search show. The consumer is involved in the customization of production by expressing their personalized preferences. In return, the producer saves on the cost of direct interaction with the consumer.

#### *Who are the laborers?*

As industries have faced increases in workers' salaries and a subsequent decline in profit rates, cultural industries have employed various approaches to enlarge their share of surplus value. From the traditional Marxist perspective, one of the approaches that capitalists attempt to use is to enlarge the amount of 'relative surplus value' by employing unskilled laborers whose payments are lower than skilled workers. For example, since capitalists have introduced various scientific management methods and new technologies to control the labor process, the previous 'supplementary labor-power,' such as women and children, can be utilized in the workplace (Marx 1965 [1887]). In other words, expanding the size of the 'industrial reserve army' is an effective way for management to reduce salary cost and deal with industrial depression.

In reality pop programs, those participants who ask tiny or even zero payment constitute a relatively cheap labor-power for the television industry. Contestants on talent shows thus have become amateur performers and thereby have replaced the professional performers or celebrities. Besides reducing salary costs, amateur performers on talent shows also provide new talent, feeding the cultural industries' enthusiasm for new stars to fit the rapid changes in cultural consumption. For cultural industries, amassing a constant supply of new artists enlarges their 'catalogues' of cultural commodities. Through this strategy, management of cultural industries has successfully lowered the 'uncertainty' of demand, which is one of the most apparent characteristics of today's cultural market, and reduces the risk of investment, since only a few of these cultural commodities become a financial success (Miège 1987; Caves 2000).

Not only have amateur performers been incorporated into the production process of cultural industries, but audiences/consumers have also been transformed into a type of labor that contributes to the manufacturing of the cultural commodity. The cultural labor that audiences/consumers perform is twofold. First, they provide 'free labor' when they voluntarily, and without pay, participate in the production process. Second, they perform the 'TV-watching' itself, which has become creative and cultural labor.

Terranova states that, in order to avoid the risk of workers' opposition and to reduce the cost of labor, late capitalism has shifted production processes 'from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine' (Terranova 2000: 33). This is what Italian autonomists call the 'social factory' (Terranova 2000: 33). For example, enthusiasts of online communities, including webloggers, forum leaders, open source programmers, mailing list editors and so on, have invested enormous and continuous labor in constructing contents on the internet. Actually, many ISPs' commodities, such as broadband services, are

only possible after these 'computer geeks,' who 'work for cappuccino,' complete the circuit of production (Terranova 2000: 33).

In the case of reality talent shows, the television audience has become a source of labor as consuming has been transformed into production in the late capitalist society. In the early debate of 'commodity audience,' Jhally claimed that audiences are working while watching because these activities produce value and surplus value for broadcasters (Jhally 1987). From this perspective, TV watching could be regarded as labor and the audience as laborers. However, Jhally's argument has been challenged and researchers in later debates have recognized that the commodity broadcasters sell to advertisers is the rate of viewing rather than total watching time, and thus the laborers in the broadcasting industry are only the employees of the television stations and rating survey companies (Meehan 1993). Nonetheless, the development of communication technologies during the 1990s has changed the production process and redefined work and labor. New interactive techniques and equipment have enabled audiences to be genuinely 'active.' Instead of 'audiences,' media consumers nowadays are 'users' (Livingstone 2004). Likewise, new technologies have blurred the boundary between work and leisure, as well as the line between production and consumption (Meehan 2000). As Richard Maxwell argues, 'consumption also has the quality of labor because the work it involves functions to complete a part of the cycle of capital expansion by fostering the turnover of investment. We don't just buy things, we make systems run' (quoted in Shimpach 2005: 354).

Fans' activities are not confined to watching only, while consumption does not only mean buying. Audiences are laboring when watching (Shimpach 2005). For the producers of reality pop program, fans' emotional connection with the contestants, along with audience votes through short-messages or the Internet, are necessary elements of the program. The more fans are involved (both quantitatively and qualitatively), the more valuable a reality pop program is (both for audiences and advertisers). As a result, the fans' activities should be recognized as labor that creates value for the products.

#### *Supergirls: new stars, cheaper labor*

China's *Supergirl* has exploited a new form of labor. Fascinated by the pop star's dream, thousands of females across China, aged from four to 89, have flooded into this program (Armitage 2005; Tang and Wang 2005). These new 'ordinary' performers, who were created by this reality television show, have partially substituted for traditional 'stars'.

From the viewpoint of labor theory, these 'relatively cheaper' or 'even unpaid' amateur singers compose an amazing percentage of the 'industry reserve army' that enables the television station, a part of the music industry chain, to cut their costs very efficiently. The producer of *Supergirl* admitted that using contestants instead of famous singers has helped the television station to efficiently decrease the amount of production expenditure. The famous female director of *Happyboy*, Long Dan-ni, suggested that neither *Supergirl* nor *Happyboy* contestants have ever received any compensation (Interview by author, 9 March 2008). *Supergirl* usually went through three phases: (1) the contest on TV; (2) a circuit concert, starting about one month after the final; (3) the personal performance career of the winners. According to e-e Media, during the first phase, no money was paid at all. Only after the final were the winners paid like new talents. For example, the artists obtained 40% of their income while the agent company kept a hefty 60% commission (Interview by author, 12 March 2008).

As a result, the producer claimed the television show is a 'win-win' for both the television station and the contestant, because the latter has a chance to be famous while the former is able to generate more profit (Xu S. 2006). *Supergirl* did not set any age limit for the contestants in 2004 and 2005. This strategy enabled the producer to enlarge the size of

potential laborers to include teenagers. However, just as governments of European countries intervened by establishing regulations on child laborers in the late 19th century, China's State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television announced a ban on under-18 contestants in 2006 (Madden 2006).

Forms of labor for Supergirls on the TV show are various and diverse. First of all, the singing contest is the basic form of labor output. Second, Supergirls perform the opening dances of the show, one of which is the 'Eight Honors, Eight Disgraces,' an entertaining rendition of the governmental propaganda dance performed in the 2006 Big Ten Contest (Gong 2006b). In addition to singing and dancing, contestants also have to fulfill other requirements, such as filming promotional commercials. For instance, it was arranged for three contestants of the 2005 Final to console a hospitalized fan, and this mercy mission was broadcast as a part of the television show (Bao 2005). Furthermore, the producer of *Supergirl* has employed not only the Supergirls who 'stay alive' on the stage, but also some of the eliminated contestants. As a matter of budget or entertainment, some eliminated Supergirls are invited as special guests or members of the jury (Gong 2006a).

Moreover, as relatively cheap performing workers, Supergirls also work for other branches of the *Supergirl*/television/music industry enterprise. The popular music industry in China has been attracted to these potential stars. Some winners who were chosen by viewers have the chance to become real superstars, as the recording companies are convinced that these 'rookies' could be successful in the record market. However, the agent of the Supergirls, e-e Media, offers these clients underprivileged contracts. According to the news media, most contracted Supergirls of e-e Media receive less than RMB 1000 dollars over several months (Li 2006). Even Li Yu-chun, the 2005 Champion, faced poor working conditions. At the end of 2005, Li Yu-chun played a role in *Hibiscus Blossom*, a soap opera broadcast on ZJSTV, and recorded the theme song for this TV series. Li Yu-chun denied going unpaid because 'I lack the experience of performing on soap operas, and have never learned stage-acting. It's my pleasure to take part in this TV series' (Qin X. 2005). However, the criticism about lower pay for the *Supergirl* artist was answered by e-e Media. 'The huge cost we faced on the production of this program and of *Supergirl* was ignored by the critics. That is why we feel the logic behind lower pay for the new talent from *Supergirl* is reasonable', stated the vice president of e-e Media (Interview by author, 12 March 2008).

#### *Fans: unpaid labor*

In addition to the contestants, fans and the audience of this program also compose a part of the labor force of the *Supergirl* enterprise. Fans of some contestants establish fan clubs and promote their idols enthusiastically and voluntarily. For instance, as fans voluntarily promoted idols through the internet and other channels, in the 2005 season, Li Yu-chun garnered more than three million text message votes from Chinese at home and abroad (*Southern City Express* 2005). This process is an important part of *Supergirl*, both to the producer and to the audience. As a result, the viewers participate in and contribute to the production process of this television program. The viewers, especially the fans, are not only 'consuming' but also 'producing' *Supergirl*.

Fans have functioned as the laborers of *Supergirl* per se. The live audience in the contest hall is an important element for this singing contest program. In the television program, it is common to see passionate fans wielding posters or flags and applauding and screaming. Fans spend a lot of money flying to and from the contest. This is done in order to support their favorite contestants (Liu and Wu 2006: 91). Close shots of disappointed fans' faces and tears when their Supergirl loses are touching moments of *Supergirl* (Liu Y. 2005). Some extremely active fans also voluntarily provide interesting stories for the producer to make the program more attractive to the audience. For instance, a group of Li Yu-chun's fans,

who call themselves 'Yu Mi' (means 'corn' and is pronounced similar to 'Yu's fans' in Mandarin), donated money to help poor college students, providing excellent advertising material for the television producer (*Dushikuaibao* 2005). The producer gathered touching stories between fans and their idols from the leaders of fan groups. In the last episode of 2005, 80 year old female Yu Mi's story was chosen. 'Those fans took the career and dreams of supported idols as their own', said the executive director Hong (Interview by author, 12 March 2008).

Fans have also functioned as free workers for other branches of the 'Supergirl/cellular phone companies/music industry' enterprise. Because the future of a contestant in the *Supergirl* competition mainly depends on the text-message votes, fans of Supergirls not only vote for their favorite girls but also launch various campaigns to encourage as many other supporters as possible to vote through cellular phone text messages. Enthusiastic supporters of these singers have organized themselves in several big cities and gone out into the streets to encourage people to vote for Supergirls (Hu 2006; Ou 2006). Hong Tao states, 'They calculated precisely how to spend the least money to generate the maximum amount of votes' (Interview by Miaojun Jian, 12 March 2008). As a result, mobile phone companies have significantly benefited from these free campaigns managed by free laborers – those fans who are eager to promote their Supergirls.

*My Supergirl, my dream: the symbolic 'payment' for volunteer labor*

The reality pop program has fulfilled symbolic and practical functions and therefore its consuming market has been expanded. By placing the entire concept of stardom center stage and democratically creating TV celebrities out of ordinary people, the reality TV program has developed a new marketing strategy. Henry Jenkins calls it 'affective economics' (Jenkins 2006: 61–62). This term implies that the media industry seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings behind the consumer's decision-making as a driving force to viewing and purchasing decisions. It also represents a new strategy that has been developed within the collaboration of the advertising and the entertainment industries (Deery 2004; Jenkins 2006: 69). In the context of a changed broadcasting environment and changing consumer trends, affective economics have constructed a new package of entertainment commodity and a set of cooperated discourses. Such discourses not only enable the consumer to be transformed into free, voluntary labor for reality programs but also encourage the participation of a more than willing, active audience. In doing so, it tends to enhance the deeper relationship between the audience, the programs and the advertisers.

There are three discourses that could be operating within the affective economics of reality talent shows. All of these evoke the affective affiliation between the program and the contestants. Moreover, they transform this affiliation, in an efficient way, by obtaining low-cost labor while engendering a maximally productive and active audience. First, by democratizing the stardom and celebrity image, reality pop programs successfully promote a key theme: *an ordinary person can become a super star* (Holmes 2004). It is an ingenious, fantasy-based ideology for the amateur market. Such programs use the cultural and economic appeal of pop music as a stage on which to produce a singing contest. This TV network stage attracts contestants from every part of the country and sells performances to ordinary people by ordinary people, rather than by famous pop stars. The participants are encouraged to perform, and then are lured into equating the labor, performed during this program, with a certain amount of creativity, self-realization and self-expression (Andrejevic 2002, 2004). Such fantasy appeal has a practical outcome for the producers; it helps to make reality programming cheaper than conventional TV dramas and sitcoms. It also explains why the reality format can effectively rely on non-traditional labor and simultaneously cut the cost usually involved in creating such a program.



Secondly, the programs fabricate an illusion of empowerment that successfully entices the audience. For example, the promotional rhetoric of the popular talent show in the UK called *Pop Idol* insists 'But this time, you choose!' (Holmes 2004: 149). A similar rhetoric is also employed by its clone, *American Idol*. 'America' gets to 'decide' who the next Idol should be (Jenkins 2006: 64). The promise of active participation certainly enhances the fans' emotional investment in the program. Following the trend of mass customization and personalization, the reality TV format has transformed the audience members from simple viewers to actual co-producers and decision makers about program content. This is what Andrejevic characterizes as the 'on-line economy' or 'interactive economy' (Andrejevic 2002, 2004). The viewer/consumer has a greater opportunity to participate actively in the production process. This is because reality programs create the belief that the audience will gain meaningful control over the content of TV programming.

Thirdly, the programs fully create a 'fan economy': fans will show their entire support to their favorite idol as well as to their fan community. According to marketing theory, the most valuable consumers, what we like to call fans, are 'loyals'. This is what Jenkins pointed out when he said, 'brand loyalty is the holy grail of affective economics' (Jenkins 2006: 72). The TV programming, joining forces with the advertisers, tries to maximize the elements that appeal to the fans in order to build a committed 'brand community'. For example, one such strategy is to promote some individual participants, then identify the loyal fan communities and finally make the product placements as affiliated entertainment properties. The TV program or performances are no longer just intellectual property, they are emotional capital. Fans always provide the most active and emotionally involved audiences. By investing in so-called emotional capital provided by its idols, this program is classified as a 'love mark' by its fans. It continues to bring the audience into direct contact with this associated brand. When audience participation becomes more deeply invested, their loyalty to the franchise and its sponsors will simultaneously accumulate and will even grow cumulatively.

As we see above, the contestants and audience members are the key source of labor in the production of *Supergirl*. The ordinary girls sing for the audience and the fans vote for their favorites. *Supergirl* is a reality pop program that facilitates the interaction between contestants and viewers while encouraging their common love for popular music. However, such an interaction is not necessarily created by the program's rules, and is not accomplished by integrated marketing alone. This article suggests that volunteer and unpaid labor is created by the program's manifestation of the 'TV Cinderella myth,' and encourages the audience to play a fantasy game on TV.

Just as Holmes's *Pop Idol* study points out, reality pop programs place the entire concept of stardom at the center stage (Holmes 2004). There are articulated ideologies, such as the star aura, the success myth, the authentic self, and the audience's power surrounding the construction of stardom and its relationship with the audience's response (Holmes 2004). In our analysis, China's *Supergirl* utilizes similar narratives about stardom and the success myth. At the same time, the passion of *Supergirl* contestants and fans plays into the 'dream come true' myth, especially a dream that can be realized by television.

With the emphasis on the mobilization of ordinary people into stardom, from low social class to high social class, *Supergirl* symbolically represents the dream of ordinary people in a media-saturated world. People want to be a 'superstar/celebrity on TV'. This is a new version of the modern Cinderella myth. The ordinary girls don't find their true love from a prince charming anymore, they receive it from the tens of thousands of TV audience fans who are gazing at them with awe and who are providing stardom with their feedback. This kind of modern Cinderella dream is promoted by the contestants as well as the fans. The byproduct of this virtual fantasy is that it also successfully transforms them into a cheaper and unpaid labor force for *Supergirl*.

*Supergirl: just be yourself! Pursuing your dream!*

First, responding to the official *Supergirl* spirit, 'Just sing it!', the contestants usually associate their motivation for *Supergirl* with a dream of self-expression and self-fulfillment. The 2005 winner, Li Yu-chun, became famous due to her peculiar, personal style. Every time she answered the reporters' questions, she quoted 'I am just being myself, I just sing what I want to sing' (Cao 2005; *The Beijing News* 2005; *Xiao Xiang Daily News* 2005). In addition, when some other contestants were asked to comment on their feelings about a possible comeback competition, the usual answers were that they were happy to 'sing out themselves and express themselves' (Pan 2006). The girls are enticed by a belief that to participate in the *Supergirl* contest is a process, not the end result accomplished by pursuing one's dream. Even if they are eliminated from the contest, the contestants still say that they will pursue their dreams and that they anticipate singing on a stage for all their supporting friends again someday. *Supergirl* ingeniously appropriates such expressions into their promotional commercials, saying that it is exactly the spirit of *Supergirl* for one to 'pursue my dream and never give up' (Hunan Television, Department of Promoting 2006).

Self-expression is not the only focus of the contestants. Consider that the main element of the Cinderella fairytale is the dramatized process of turning an ugly duckling into a beautiful swan. In *Supergirl*, the stories of every 'ordinary' contestant are always a part of the appeal for the viewer. With the realism format of reality TV programming, *Supergirl* interviews the contestants' families and friends. Audiences see that most Supergirls are from ordinary families. For examples, Li Yu-chun's father is a policeman at a railroad station in Chengdu. The parents of another Supergirl, Ji Min-jia, one of the five finalists, are laid-off workers (Liu D. 2005; Fan *et al.* 2005). These background spots are not only ingeniously created to enhance the melodramatic content of the show, but also to display the ordinariness and authenticity of the Supergirls before the show. As the contest progresses to its final stage, the contestants are trained to be more and more like professional performers. With the aesthetic style of the TV show, ordinary girls are transformed to look like superstars. Suddenly, the whole contest process embodies a Cinderella formula. As the show progresses, stories unfold about ordinary girls who finally make their dreams come true and magically and miraculously end up being celebrated and beloved stars.

*Fans: my Supergirl, my dream*

As *Supergirl* fans observe the fulfillment of Cinderella dreams for the contestants, they themselves may experience a projected fulfillment of their own dreams. For example, a 40-year-old woman named Ms. Hu, a fan of Li Yu-chun, said that, 'The Supergirls just carry out the ordinary person's dream for us' (Hong 2005). Another fan, a university student, said that, 'Everybody thinks we are fools, always busy and spending money, ... but Zhou Bi-chang is our energy source. Our feedback can give her the power to sing forever' (Hong 2005).

Obviously, the destiny of each Supergirl is deeply interwoven into the viewer's own destiny. According to the results of a survey by the leading Chinese search engine website, Baidu, the interactivity far surpassed the reality as the main reason why audiences enjoy the talent shows in China. To a certain extent, the process and outcome of such talent shows are controlled by the votes from the audience. It is a type of program that is essentially controlled by the viewers (Searchlab 2007). Some fans would even say that, 'The Supergirl's dream is my dream'. In a newspaper review, a reporter compared the 2006 winner, Shang Wen-jie and the runner-up, Tan Wei-wei. According to the analysis, it was Shang, not Tan, who was the viewers' choice for Cinderella (Wang 2006). In the observers' point of view, it is because 'the voters tend to favor the candidate who is most like themselves'. Not only

was Tan a professional vocalist before joining this contest but there were rumors about Tan's higher social class, which is considered a harmful factor affecting the voters' choice (Wang 2006). In other words, the intertwined destiny between the Supergirls and fans is not only orchestrated on a practical level, but it is also symbolically absorbed into the personal ideology of *Supergirl* viewers.

Utilizing the symbolic and emotional connections between contestants and fans, *Supergirl* appeals to huge audiences and generates plenty of unpaid labor. By continuously promoting its catchy and enticing slogans, such as 'love her and keep her', *Supergirl* generates huge profits from its TV ratings and also from all the cellular text messages produced by the voters. Some fans from richer families have actually bought more than 10 cellular numbers in order to increase their voting power for their idols (Zhang Y. 2005). The 'pursuing one's own dream' slogan deeply parallels the rationalization of extreme behaviors by fans. For example, a fan's parents told a reporter that they can't understand why the fans are crazy about *Supergirl*, but they are impressed and respect the persistence of the people involved.

Such unpaid and extra labor, performed by fans, paradoxically, delivers a promise of audience agency. However, this paper is not denying the potential empowerment of fans and participants derived from such a program. Following the 'free labor' viewpoint of Terranova (2000), it is noted that more and more theorists caution about the labor relations in the emerging participatory culture (Andrejevic 2007, 2008; van Dijck 2009). We suggest researchers analyze the interpenetration between the fans' labor and creative activities. We should also be wary of possible exploitation as described by Andrejevic when commenting about such a fan economy. The multifarious roles of users, within our media environment, have been redrawing 'the boundaries between commerce, content and information' (van Dijck 2009: 42). This paper attempts to suggest and thus demonstrate that a different perspective is needed in order to understand the ways organizers steer and manipulate the audience's participation.

In our opinion, it is an interactivity operating both on the practical and the symbolic level that empowers *Supergirl* viewers. The byproduct is a transformation into free labor. In the *Supergirl* phenomenon, fans even generate creative names for their groups, such as 'the corns', 'the sesames', 'the meal boxes' and so on. The fans scream and work hard in the live contests as well as on the street and on the Internet. The fans also enthusiastically motivate people to vote for their choice of Supergirls. All of this involvement and interactivity enhances the unfolding of a fantastic game on TV. If you work hard, you can decide the game's climax.

## Conclusion

By creating an innovative process of launching new talent into large media audiences, the TV stations and the entertainment industries, called the 'cross-media entertainment company' (Leyshon *et al.* 2005), generated profits from an entirely new form of commodity. In doing so, they reduced labor costs as they kept recruiting cheaper or even unpaid laborers. Several pop reality programs, such as *Pop Stars* and *Pop/American Idol*, proved the success of this new business model. This paper demonstrates how China's *Supergirl* offers its viewers and contestants 'dreams' as 'symbolic payments'. This form of ruse effectively transforms the participation of audiences into a saleable commodity with cheap or unpaid labor. The flexible, localized and customized profitable model of this program indicates an insurgence of a new economy in a growing and changing entertainment market.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, the staggering success of *Supergirl* in China suggests the need for further probing into the development of the entertainment industries. First, *Supergirl* signals the emergence of a new stardom because it constitutes an evolutionary model of 'ordinary

people entertaining themselves.' By viewing a talent show such as *Supergirl* or *American Idol* audiences experience the pleasure of witnessing the process in which the contestants improve their skills while they progress toward success. This new model of star-making has demystified the process of manufacturing stardom. Audiences can become narcissistic as they search for the reflection of a better self-image on the screen rather than in an enigmatic façade (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). Instead of making 'impressions' on the audience, the media now provides audiences with multiple ways of producing their own 'expressions' (Jenkins 2006: 63). Rather than totally replacing the traditional style of stardom, the new folk-stars supplement existing celebrities in China's entertainment industry. Compared with the previous model, the new model has a marketing advantage. Folk-stars become celebrities before they actually release the albums.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the new media commodities that these *Supergirl*-like talent shows have manufactured enable the producers to expand their business to other fields, including records, concerts, and name brand marketing. The traditionally separate media sectors – such as music, broadcasting, advertising, etc – are merging into an entertainment complex. Serialized talent competitions in China are operated not only as what Leyshon *et al.* called 'the externalization of the A & R functions' (Leyshon *et al.* 2005: 196) but also as a powerful marketing tool for launching the careers of young performers. In conclusion, *Supergirl* has formulated a new folk stardom by providing 'democratic entertainment'. On the other hand it has created a new approach for the entertainment business in China's growing markets.

## Notes

1. From the *Supergirl* Official Website: <http://mm.rednet.cn/>.
2. The revenue from the sponsor, however, was estimated as being much higher in media reports. Some reported the amount as being as much as 28 million RMB (Bao 2005; Wang X. 2005).
3. The top two cities in China.
4. Taiwan has also seen a wave of reality talent shows as of 2007. The local reality pop program, *One Million Star*, broadcasted by CTS in January 2007, has created a phenomenon that can be described as the 'Stardom Fever' (Wang 2007). By the final episode of its first season in July, it had created ratings of about 7.1%. This surpassed the top 2 ratings of prime-time dramas (Yu 2007). Meanwhile, the album released after the finals became the best selling album in the first half of 2007. Compact disc sales were estimated to be 120,000 units (Lai 2007). With a similar business model, this program is praised as a creative collaboration of a trans-media enterprise, a new phenomenon in Taiwan's TV history. Integrating the record company, the program production company and the conglomerate of broadcasting station, newspaper and cable channels, this program also represents a global reality pop trend that could be a 'super business' in a different local context (Jian 2007; Yu 2007).
5. For example, one week after the end of the 2005 final contest, an album released by the Hunan TV station had gained a huge response from its fans. Before the formal on-sale time, the advanced Internet sales for this album were estimated to be an astounding 650,000 units (Bao 2005). Minna, a fan of Li Yu-chun said, 'If Li releases her album, even just an EP, I will buy the legal one. She is the first and only one whose legal EP I will buy' (*Xing Ming Evening News* 2005). In other words, *Supergirl* has successfully produced a customized music commodity, which, in return, has helped the sale of the record company's product.

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### Special terms

Beijing 北京/北京	<i>Myshow</i> 我型我秀/我型我秀
<i>Celebrity Coach</i> 名师高徒/名师高徒	<i>One Million Star</i>
Changsha 长沙/長沙	超级星光大道/超級星光大道
Chengdu 成都/成都	OuYang Chang-lin 欧阳常林/歐陽常林
comeback competition 复活赛/復活賽	pingmin ouxiang 平民偶像/平民偶像
Dare to sing and don't be afraid of shame 敢唱不怕丑/敢唱不怕醜	pursue my dream and never give up 为梦想永不言弃/為夢想永不言棄
<i>Dreaming China</i> 梦想中国/夢想中國	Shanghai 上海/上海
Eight Honors, Eight Disgraces 八荣八耻/八榮八恥	Shang Wen-jie 尚雯婕/尙雯婕
Guangzhou 广州/廣州	Shenyang 沈阳/瀋陽
Hangzhou 杭州/杭州	Stardom Fever 星光热/星光熱
<i>Happyboy</i> 快乐男声/快樂男聲	<i>Supergirl</i> 超级女声/超級女聲
Hong Tao 洪涛/洪濤	<i>Super Juvenile</i> 超级少年/超級少年
I am master of my own happiness 我的快乐我作主/我的快樂我作主	Tan Wei-wei 谭维维/譚維維
Ji Min-jia 纪敏佳/紀敏佳	the corns 玉米/玉米
Just sing it 想唱就唱/想唱就唱	the meal boxes 盒饭/盒飯
Just sing it, sing it great 想唱就唱, 要唱得漂亮/想唱就唱,要唱得漂亮	the sesames 芝麻/芝麻
Long Dan-ni 龙丹妮/龍丹妮	Tianyu media (e-e media) 天娱传媒/天娛傳媒
<i>Matchlove</i> 绝对唱响/絕對唱響	Wang Ke 王柯/王柯
Mengniu Dairy 蒙牛乳业/蒙牛乳業	Wang Ping 王平/王平
<i>My Hero</i> 加油! 好男儿/加油! 好男兒	Wei Wen-bin 魏文彬/魏文彬
	Yu Mi 玉米/玉米
	Zhou Bi-chang 周笔畅/周筆暢

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