

Are You a Good Chinese Musician?

*The Ritual Transmission of Social Norms
in a Chinese Reality Music Talent Show*

Miaowen Zhou



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Abstract

The sensational success of a Chinese reality music talent show, *Super Girls' Voice (SGV)*, in 2005 not only crowned many unknown Chinese girls/women with the hail of celebrity overnight, but also caused hot debates on many subjects including whether the show triggered cultural, even political democracy in China. 10 years have passed and China is in another heyday of reality music talent shows. However, the picture differs from before. For instance, not everybody can take part in it anymore. And the state television China Central Television (CCTV) joined the competition for market share. It actually became a competitive player of “reality” by claiming to find the best original and creative Chinese musicians whose voices CCTV previously avoided or oppressed. In this thesis, I will examine one CCTV show, *The Song of China (SOC)*, in order to examine what the norms of good Chinese music and musicians are in the context of reality music talent shows. My work will hopefully give you some insights into the characteristics and the wider social and political influences of such reality music talent shows in the post-*SGV* era. I carried out a content analysis with support of theories such as media ritual, ritualization and social norms on *SOC*'s first season. Media rituals and ritualization became powerful tools to unfold: how *SOC* appeared to stand in for the credible place of presenting and evaluating real, original and creative music and musicians; how *SOC* repetitively reproduced the distinction between media (CCTV) and ordinary people (musicians) and naturalized the power of the media (CCTV); how the Chinese musicians and audience of the program can be governed through the program. Furthermore, through the rituals and ritualization, norms of good Chinese music/musicians were transmitted. In short, good Chinese music should be creative in a way that combines Chinese elements with western music style; and good Chinese musicians/people should possess many particular virtues, they respect authority, and consider themselves as the successors of the Chinese cultural heritage and as contributors to the globalization of China's popular culture. These norms, in return, reinforced the power of CCTV. Through the prism of *SOC*, we can see how recent Chinese reality music shows, instead of empowering common people, has become a new place where the authorities, CCTV, and the state leave their marks.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Thesis statement

Like anywhere else, the relationship between popular music and television has been complex in China. We can hear pop music on television all the time, and television makes entertaining programs based on pop music to attract audiences. It is not to exaggerate to say that pop music and television shape and influence each other in many ways. In this thesis, I aim to capture some dynamics of this relationship through the prism of reality TV, specifically, through reality pop music talent show. Since the groundbreaking success of *Super Girls' Voice* (*SGV*, *chaoji nüsheng*, 超级女声) of local TV channel Hunan Satellite Television (HSTV) in 2005, reality pop music talent shows have been changing and shaping the Chinese television and popular music landscape. The ups and downs of reality pop shows have caused many discussions about cultural democracy, the competition between the state TV channel and the local TV channels, Chinese popular music and state politics, etc. in both the media and the academic world.

In order to reveal the essence of Chinese reality pop shows and their relationship with Chinese popular music in the post-*SGV* period, I will focus on one show, *The Song of China* season 1 (*SOCl*, *zhongguo haogeku*, 中国好歌曲), or *Sing My Song* (the official English title) which was produced by the official state TV channel, China Central Television (CCTV) and private production company Canxing Production. It was broadcast through CCTV-3 in mainland China, CTi Variety in Taiwan, Entertainment Channel in Hong Kong, and the show's videos are available online on various websites. The program claimed to discover “original and creative” (*yuanchuang*, 原创) Chinese musicians who write and perform their own music, focusing on delivering good songs instead of making commercial stars. It achieved high ratings, mostly positive reviews from the media, and the format managed to be the first Chinese talent show format to be exported to the West.

I started exploring the program by simply asking a question about the show's title: *What kinds of songs were supposed to be called good Chinese songs?* When I began to watch the show I felt a bit surprised that CCTV let, for example, several independent rock musicians perform heavy rock music, a style that has rarely appeared on CCTV in the past, not to mention during prime time. Considering the history of independent Chinese rock music or independent Chinese music in general, I wondered whether the show signaled any significant changes in the relationship between the state and previously suppressed individual musical voices. Will the individual musicians be welcomed to create music as they want to from now on and be supported and promoted by the state? With these questions in my mind, I proposed the following main research questions: *What are the norms of good Chinese music and musicians? How are the norms of good Chinese music and musicians transmitted through the show?* In this thesis I will try to answer these questions above.

Though I emphasize on analyzing the images that were shown on the screen, instead of how the audience received and were influenced by the images, I am primarily concerned with the social context, meaning and influence of the show. I found the theory of media ritual and ritualization very inspiring when it came to explaining the media's role in organizing society and influencing how people imagine the society. With the help of this theory, it will become possible to see how reality pop shows such as *SOC* reinforced some power structures instead of challenging them. I will also borrow the theory of the ritual transmission of social norms in order to examine that through the actions of rituals, what kind of norms were transmitted, how they were transmitted and whether the norms could also reinforce some power structures. In fact, I found that instead of the norms of good Chinese music, the norms of good Chinese musicians/people were transmitted through rituals.

Through a detailed content analysis of *SOCI*, I find that the program consists of many media rituals that are organized around media-related categories and boundaries, and it is a space of ritualization where these categories and boundaries are naturalized, and thus the power of program and its co-producer and broadcaster CCTV is reinforced. Also, social norms of good

Chinese music and musicians, even good Chinese people were transmitted through the rituals and ritualization. Good Chinese music should generally be a combination of Chinese elements and western music style. Good Chinese musicians or people should dare to express their true selves and possess virtues such as being filial, optimistic, persevering, hardworking, honest, etc.. They also should respect the authority and be good at working in a team that is led by the authority. At last, they should consider themselves as a part of China and Chinese culture and that they can contribute to the prosperity of the nation and its people. These norms also reinforce the power of CCTV as it usually promotes similar norms. So in the end, though *SOC* might help unknown underground musicians gain some popularity and help us, as audience members, get to know more interesting musicians in China and other Chinese-speaking areas, it did not challenge the social order that CCTV holds the power while the musicians and the audience do not. By participating and watching the shows, the musicians and the audience are “governed” through the naturalized norms.

My thesis will hopefully contribute to the study of reality TV in the following ways: I tried to creatively combine the theory of media ritual and social norms, raising questions about power, something that has seldom been done by other researches. Furthermore, my thesis focuses on the boom of Chinese reality music talent shows in the post-*SGV* period by analyzing one particular show, trying to offer perspective on the new characteristics and social influence of such shows and CCTV’s role during this period. I hope to raise the awareness that reality TV programs in China, like those in the West, are not only entertaining objects or tools for the TV channels to compete with each other, but also places where wider values are constructed, and they organize the society and influence us as social beings.

1.2 Thesis outline

Before I start dealing with the details of *SOC*, in Chapter 2, I offer background that includes the brief history of reality pop show’s development in China, political economy behind Chinese reality TV and the relationship between the concept of being “original and creative”

and state/CCTV in order to tell where *SOC* stands in the whole picture of the Chinese media landscape. In Chapter 3 I list and discuss the previous studies and researches on reality TV, especially Chinese reality pop shows and similar western shows, and state what this thesis can offer to the field. Discussion of the theories and what kind of research methods I used to organize and analyze my materials are in Chapter 4. From Chapter 5 to 8, I follow the chronological order of the show and analyze each ritual I identified in the process. Finally I will sum up my findings and give some concluding remarks.

Chapter 2: Background

At first, let us look at the introduction of *The Song of China* that is featured on CCTV's official website:

The Song of China is an originally-created reality music talent show presented by channel CCTV-3. The program independently developed a new format, focusing on original music for the first time. It delivers new creative Chinese musicians into the Chinese-speaking music scene, and rebuilds the life of music and the spirit of creativity. (The Introduction of the Program 2013)

The show claims to be and do a number of things, and unless we examine them one by one, it is difficult to grasp what the show really is and does. The description touches upon the following terms: reality TV, talent show, new format, CCTV, original music, creative Chinese musicians, Chinese-speaking music scene and the life and the spirit of music. Next, I will try to look into the meaning and history of these terms and the relationship between them in order to grasp the context of where *The Song of China* came into being.

2.1 Reality music talent shows in China

Reality TV, or reality show, *zhenrenxiu* (真人秀) in Chinese, is a television format derived from western countries, and its origins can be traced back to 1940s. In a reality TV program, participants are supposed to act according to the rules of the program and eventually achieve a goal, and their honest reactions and true feelings are supposed to be revealed under different circumstances during the show (Xu 2006). Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette defines reality TV as “the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real” (Murray and Ouellette 2009, p.3). Reality TV features both celebrities and ordinary people in real life, but the participation of the latter is dominant in terms of the amount. Therefore, the difference between *The Song of China* and other television singing contests such as CCTV's National Young Singers' Competition (*quanguo qingnian geshou dianshi*

dajiangsai, 全国青年歌手电视大奖赛) is that the former underlines the participants' quality of being real and ordinary.

Reality TV has achieved huge commercial success in the west, and the genres of reality TV have become very diversified. They have become “increasingly cross-generic in pursuit of programs that can satisfy multiple audience” (Redden 2008). Reality pop music programs like *The Song of China*, for example, belongs to the category of “talent contest”, similar to *American Idol*, which focuses on one particular talent of the contestants. However, it also has the elements of “makeover program”, such as *What Not to Wear*, which features expert judges that help the participants improve their skills at doing something and which results in the transformation of the participants.

Under globalization and the development of transnational media economy, the reality TV format has traveled around the world and settled down on the soil that was out of Europe and USA. Since the first Chinese reality show *Survival Challenge* (*shengcun da tiaozhan*, 生存大挑战) was shown on Guangdong TV in 2000, reality TV has been continually adopted and developed in China until now. All kinds of reality shows have their Chinese versions. However, it was not until *Super Girls' Voice* (*chaoji nüsheng*, 超级女声) which was broadcast by Hunan Satellite Television (HSTV) in 2005 that a reality show managed to attract the whole nation (de Kloet and Landsberger 2012). The show imitated western reality pop programs such as *The American Idol*. It welcomed Chinese females from all regions in China, people from all ages and all walks of life to participate in a singing contest, and it drew around 400 million television viewers for its finale (Meng 2009). After *SGV*, several similar reality pop music programs started to appear on Chinese television between 2005 and 2007, including CCTV's *Dream China* (*mengxiang zhongguo*, 梦想中国). Nevertheless, *SGV*'s enormous ratings success also led to moral criticism and then strict administrative restriction towards reality pop programs. A decline in such shows then occurred between 2008 and 2010 (The Beijing News 2014). *The Voice of China* (VOC, *zhongguo haoshengyin*, 中国好声音), which was an adoption of *The Voice of Holland* format, was then the next big, successful TV show in this genre in 2012 and was broadcast by

Zhengjiang Satellite Television.

VOC can be regarded as the beginning of a new active era of reality music talent shows. Following its success, shows with high ratings like *The Most Beautiful Harmonies* (Beijing TV) and *I am a Singer* (HSTV) started to appear. Compared to early shows, the most noticeable characteristics of these new ones are: (1) The participation of the audience was considerably reduced: The procedure of mass selection (*haixuan*, 海选) is not shown, and SMS voting by the TV audience was removed; (2) Heavily relying on importing formats: the formats are bought from countries such as the Netherlands, USA, South Korea etc.; (3) Pre-selecting talented contestants: most of the contestants are musicians with certain professional background and they were contacted and selected by the production team. As reality music talent shows from local satellite TVs started to occupy the top of Friday night rating charts again, CCTV cooperated with the same production company that co-produced *VOC*, CanXing Production, and presented *The Song of China*. It reached 480 million viewers through the series, becoming a strong counterpart to the shows from local TVs (People.cn 2014). It had the characteristics of (1) and (3), and settings such as “blind audition” was borrowed from *The Voice* format. However, *SOC* was considered an originally created reality TV format, and the rights to it were bought by Britain’s ITV Global Studios, thereby making it the first original Chinese talent show format to be exported.

2.2 Political economy behind reality pop music shows in China

In order to understand the emergence, decline and rebirth of reality pop music shows in China, it is necessary to examine the context of the political economy of the Chinese television industry, in which my focus will be the marketization and the commercialization of the television industry, the cooperation between Chinese media and global capital, and the dynamic competition between CCTV and local television stations, especially provincial satellite television stations.

From 1958 to the late 1970s, CCTV, as a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has been dominant in the Chinese media. Since the dawn of the reform era that started in 1978, the Chinese media market has gradually been opened to a new world of market economy mechanism and media technologies. All the economic units, including the state-owned ones, had to be responsible for their own finance instead of heavily depending on state support. Though CCTV had the best economical and political resources, it had to reform in order to adapt to the market. The overall trend is to become more competitive, modern, international and audience-oriented, and CCTV continues to be in the leading position in the national market.

However, during its development, CCTV were confronted with challenges from players both outside and inside the market. In the domestic market, satellite technology has helped many provincial stations reach a national audience. In addition, without ideological control as tight as the state has had on CCTV, local stations such as HSTV got to experiment with reality TV formats from abroad in order to produce popular entertainment shows such as *Happy Campus* (*kuai le dabenyi*, 快乐大本营) from the late 1990s. Another reason that HSTV managed to have breakthroughs in entertainment programs is that Hunan did not have a strong local economy at the time, compared to Beijing, Shanghai or Guangdong where TV stations rely on commercial income. (Lee, He and Huang 2007) Therefore, HSTV paved its own way into developing new types of programs instead of relying on producing news or other regular programs. After 2004's *SGV*, the program attracted one of the biggest dairy producers in China, Mongniu Dairy, to sponsor the 2005 show which made *SGV* the first commercially sponsored reality TV program in China (de Kloet and Landsberger 2012), and it has been noted that the company invested 100 million RMB (Cui and Lee 2010). Moreover, by not having to pay for celebrities and by adopting the unpaid labor of ordinary people became an ingenious way of saving money. Other technologies such as internet and SMS voting made the audience participation in such programs deeper than ever. That, in return, generated both huge public interest and enormous income. It is in this context *SGV* was born, and the era of selecting pop music talent (*xuanxiu*, 选秀) began.

After *SGV* achieved national success and drew big attention from both China and abroad, other TV stations, including CCTV followed by producing similar shows in order to divide up the aroused audience. However, *SGV* certainly received much moral criticism from the media, established artists, government officials, etc.. HSTV was criticized as only caring about boosting their ratings, and the program was accused of being vulgar and spreading unhealthy values to Chinese people. Moreover, *SGV* gave the audience a chance to get away from the official ideology and cultural content, and to offer a platform for people to express themselves and negotiate gender roles, which in a way led to a kind of political challenge to the state. Therefore, from 2006 to 2009, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) ordered the program to shorten the broadcasting time, to express good values, to avoid extremely emotional images, and eventually canceled the SMS voting. From 2008 to 2010, reality pop music shows declined due to both strict rules and less public attention.

The success of *VOC* in 2012 brought reality pop music shows back to life. The ratings for the first three episodes of *VOC* season 1 grew from 1.5 percent to 2.8 percent and to 3.093 percent, ranking number one among nationwide ratings. In addition to having adopted an already popular format, another reason for *VOC*'s success can be credited to a new way of cooperating between Zhejiang TV and the privately owned production company Can Xing Production (in 2012, it belonged to STAR TV which was owned by both News Corporation from USA and China Media Capital): a real commission (*zhibo fenli*, 制播分离), meaning that the production company and the TV station form “a partnership in which both parties share both the revenue and the risk”(Ye 2012). Usually, the production and broadcast of a program is done by the same team, which was not good for the development of new types of programs of good quality. Even when cooperating with a production company, the TV station has the final say on whether the program is going to be broadcast or not, and the production company only gets a fixed pay (Ye 2012). Sometimes the production company does not even get to produce the whole program but only offer ideas (Cheng, Li and Wan 2014). In terms of *VOC*, without the expectation of a fixed income, both Can Xing and Zhejiang TV tried their best to produce *VOC* in order to make the biggest profit from dividing the advertising income.

Except for *Star Boulevard* (*xingguang dadao*, 星光大道), due to its tight control over production, CCTV lacked new influential entertainment shows that were able to successfully compete against programs from these local TV stations. Hence, they cooperated with Can Xing Production the way Zhejiang TV had done prior to them, and in 2013 *SOC* was on CCTV-3. The resulting ratings for the program peaked at number 1 from the 1st to the 5th episode, and the program found itself number 2 to 4 on the ratings charts from episodes 6 to 11. This equals a great success. However, *SOC* might not just be a result of CCTV's desperate need for better production. Can Xing Production also needed a resourceful platform like CCTV for a show without famous pre-existing songs in order to be influential (Changjiang Daily 2013). *SOC* is an example of how official TV and global media corporation work together to achieve both of their needs. Moreover, though *SOC* was called an original Chinese talent show format, it is actually a mix-blood product due to its similarities to western formats. Nevertheless, the export of the show to Britain promoted the image of the Chinese official media and China to some degree.

The reform of commission in China actually started in the late 1980s, and in 2013 and 2014, policies were issued by the state in order to help transform the traditional production agencies into market players (Sun 2015). In order to be more competitive in the market, CCTV started their reform again, as more and more profitable and popular entertainment shows on CCTV were produced through a tight partnership between the station and production companies (Zhou 2014).

Looking through the history of reality pop music programs in China, I became aware that the state was an important driving force for all the shows, and it has been deeply involved in the process of the marketization and trans-nationalization of the media industry. It does not only have a strong grip on the local TV production's direction, it has also used new ideas, new mechanisms, new strategies and new relationships with global corporations to boost the media industry and ensure its official mouthpiece's position. CCTV, keeping up with trends and having the state on its side, is becoming better and better at entertaining people. Through

well-produced popular reality TV programs, CCTV may also do better at convincing the audience what is “really” happening to ordinary people and society.

2.3 *Yuanchuang* and state politics

SOC was looking for good original and creative music (*yuanchuang yinyue*, 原创音乐) and original and creative musicians, (*yuanchuang yinyueren*, 原创音乐人). In terms of *SOC*, original musicians are those musicians who can write their own style of pop music, at least the melody, and the better they can perform the better. Original music in this context means music written by these people, meaning that they are not cover songs. A comparable concept in the west is “singer-songwriter” though those belonging to the latter category usually writes everything themselves and are traditionally more involved with the folk-acoustic tradition.

But what does “being original and creative (*yuanchuang*)” mean in the context of China? When it came to art and literature, the definition of originality focused on the difference between “origin” (*benyuan*, 本源) and “copy” (*fuzhi*, 复制)” (Liu 2014). Art critic Lei Da noted: “*Yuan* (原) is very important. It emphasizes origin (*yuanchuxing*, 原初性). (...) The work can’t be copied. (...) It’s fresh, unique, against banality, the out-dated and repetition. It is a new way of understanding the world and life,” and “creative work must have originality” (Lei 2008). This definition sets a rather high standard for *yuanchuang*, which is higher than *SOC*’s concept, as the latter opens its arms to almost whoever has the ability to write and play music.

In the article “Original Creation and the Development of Original Creativity” by Wang Yalun, it is mentioned that *yuanchuang* was started to be seen in words such as *yuanchuan yinyue* (original music) in the media in late 1990s. (Wang 2002) The earliest use of the word in an official context I could find is “China Original Music Billboard” (*zhongguo yuanchuang yinyue liuxingbang*, 中国原创音乐流行榜) which was held between 2000 and 2012, and gave awards to musicians, singers and songs from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The billboard was recognized and encouraged by the Ministry of Culture. As far as I know, the musicians who won the awards were not completely original musicians in the *SOC* sense, except that one award was close: “Best Creative Singer” (*zuijia chuangzuo geshou*, 最佳创作歌手). *Yuanchuang* was also seen in words such *yuanchuang xiaoshuo* (original novel), *yuanchuang play* (original musical), etc. (Wang 2002).

However, it is said that after then-chairman Jiang Zemin said: “We should encourage original creation (*yuanshixing chuangxin*, 原始性创新)” (Xinhuanet.com 2001), *yuanchuang* became a frequently used word in media (Wang 2002). Jiang’s speech was about the importance of innovation in science and techniques, and the phrase “original creation” has been used in many articles in regards to science studies. From 2001 until today, innovation, creativity, the spirit of being creative in science, in technique, and in culture has been emphasized strongly in state policies.

After Jiang Zemin, former chairman Hu Jintao also proposed concepts such as “insist on walking the independently creative path with Chinese characteristics” and “work hard on building an innovative country”, which put emphasis on innovations of science and technique (Xinhuanet.com 2006). In terms of culture, the concept of “soft power” was an important one in the official discourse, increasing the soft power has been a strategical task of the party-state (People.cn 2012). Soft power refer to the cohesion, vitality, innovation and dissemination of a country’s culture, as well as the emotional appeal and influence the culture brings (People.cn 2012), The current chairman of China, Xi Jinping proposed in 2013 that China should increase its cultural soft power. The parts in his speech that were related to creativity:

Work hard on realizing the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese traditional morality, leading people to aspire and pursue a moral life, making every one of the 1.3 billion people as a body of spreading Chinese morality and culture. (Xinhuanet.com 2013)

Spread the creative fruit of contemporary Chinese culture that both inherits good traditional culture and promotes the spirit of the era, and both has roots in China and faces the world (Xinhuanet.com

2013).

From his speech we can see an emphasis on the traditional Chinese culture and morality when it comes to creation of art. In a speech about art and literature in 2014, Xi reiterated that art should be made for the masses, and its value should be making people morally good (*shan*, 善) (Xinhuanet.com 2014). As previous leaders such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, Xi also tends to tell artists how they should create art and how art should aim at educating people and shaping people's morality.

In a word, the meaning of being originally creative, creative or innovative has been discussed considerably in China since the beginning of the 21st century. The meaning has varied depending on the situations where these words have been uttered. The discussions reflect a conscious urge of the Chinese culture sphere and by the CCP to increase the competitiveness of Chinese culture and an attempt to lift up the image of China in the world. When discussing a reality show looking for originality and creativity on the state-owned and -operated channel CCTV, knowing what kind of ideology the CCP is pushing in the culture sphere helps to explain some phenomena that occur in *SOC*.

2.4 Pop music and CCTV

The goal of this part is to describe how pop music has developed in China, who the earliest original musicians in mainland China are, and how original pop music and the state managed to coexist together.

After *gangtai* pop music (popular music from Taiwan and Hong Kong) entered the People's Republic of China in the 1970s, pop music as a style took almost 10 years to be recognized officially by the CCP. Pop music had another name, *tongsu* (meaning: common, 通俗), because *liuxing* (meaning: popular, 流行) sounded "negative" back then (Baranovitch 2003, p. 15). In 1986, *tongsu changfa* (meaning: pop music singing style, 通俗唱法) was settled as a

legitimate category in CCTV's annual National Young Singers' Competition (Zhang 2009). Also in 1986, an officially organized *tongsu* music concert "A Hundred Singers Concert" (*bairen gexing yanchanghui*, 百人歌星演唱会) was held in Beijing where Cui Jian, the "Godfather of Chinese rock" performed, too. Therefore, 1986 is considered as the year that mainland pop was born (Baranovitch 2003, p.18).

According to SOC's standard of original musicians, in mainland China, only rock musicians such as Cui Jian and folk-pop musicians such as Li Chunbo can be called the earliest original musicians because they wrote and performed the songs themselves. Later in the 1980s, private venues such as disco venues and bars emerged, and those kinds of establishments offered musicians chances to break away from officially organized music events and enabled them to perform live in order to increase their income. This became the starting point for many original musicians, in particular rock musicians. Within the circle of rock music, there are certain norms on how the musicians should act and how rock music should be, on which Jeroen de Kloet has done good research, and these norms may not fit the expectations of the CCP. No matter whether they played rock or folk pop music, individual musicians represented individualism and alienation from the official collectivism and integration, towards which the state was on the alert.

Mainland original rock/pop musicians' relationship with the CCP has been a complicated one regardless of whether one is looking at the 1990s, 2000s or 2010s. Many scholars have focused on the dichotomy between resistance and hegemony, but Nimrod Baranovitch suggested in his book *China's New Voices* that the relationship is more like a symbiotic and dialectical one, which Kloet also seemed to agree with in his *China with a Cut* (de Kloet 2010). This argument can still stand today.

With the marketization of the music industry and people's growing need for entertainment, the state opens its arms to pop music and global capital in a way that it can still hold a relatively firm grip on what kind of music and musicians are offered to the masses, and thereby further ensuring its position. As television has become the most important mass media in China since

the 1990s, it became a central place for the state to deliver to the audience the pop music it favored. CCTV established Chinese Music Television (MTV) in 1993 to play video clips of pop songs that “carry on Chinese traditional culture” and expressed “patriotism and nationalism”, “good citizenship, collectivism, productivity, education, the centrality of Beijing, Chinese sovereignty, especially over Hong Kong (before 1997) and Tibet, and in a more subtle way, the Communist Party”, “stability and calmness” (Baranovitch 2003, p. 194-205). Today, the styles and nationalities of pop music that are presented on Chinese MTV are much more varied, but if we click through CCTV’s music channel CCTV-15 (launched in 2004)’s website, we can see that the proportion of music videos that express one or more of the ideas listed above is much higher than others. This is not surprising, as the introduction of the channel states: “The main broadcast content is classical music and folk music from the world and China, promoting Chinese ethnic music (*minzu yinyue*, 民族音乐) (The Introduction of the Channel 2015).

In the 1990s, the state also sponsored large concerts and they held music competitions through which it tried to “define standards for creativity and performance” (Baranovitch 2003, p.214), and by offering the artists chances to perform on national TV, it made the artists somehow conform to its norms and ideologies and to promote its image. In this sense, state-sponsored concerts, *National Young Singers’ Competition* and *SOC* perhaps do not differ from each other much. Individual musicians, by attending these shows, increase their own income, or at least are exposed to a large national audience. Many of these musicians have faced several challenges in their careers such as incomplete copyright laws, censorship, the general recession in the music industry, lack of money and fame, etc.. Internet has helped many of them get some attention, but the platform of CCTV stands for good production and human resources that an ordinary independent musician usually cannot reach. In return, by showing up on CCTV, these musicians promote the image of CCTV, for example its inclusiveness and its will to entertain. Also, the musicians have to conform to some rules. According to the report of Southern Weekly, many “disharmonious” words and curses were removed from the hip-hop song sung with Sichuan dialect. The performer Xie Di was said to change these words into something about pursuing good music: word *laozi* (老子, a rude way of saying

“me”) was not considered good enough either but it remained in the performance because the performance would have become impossible without it (Cai and Zhu 2014).

In addition to original musicians from mainland China, *SOC* also welcomed Chinese-speaking musicians from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and American Chinese. From being critical and skeptical towards *gangtai* pop music, it is evident that the state's attitude towards musicians from outside mainland China has changed if one considers that artists from Hong Kong, Taiwan and even Singapore and Korea now get to play in the official celebration of Chinese spring festival at the most important and popular concert on CCTV, the annual ritualized *Spring Festival Gala* (*chunjie lianhuan wanhui*, 春节联欢晚会). As the transnational economy and media communication grew deeper and wider, many musicians outside of mainland have gained great popularity in China. On one hand, having popular musicians from outside mainland can increase the ratings, and on the other hand, the state promotes its “pan-Chineseness” and mainland as the center of this pan-Chineseness (Baranovitch 2003, p. 230). As Baranovitch pointed out in his study of Chinese pop music in 1990s, the state did not challenge other Chinese political identities with the mainland one; on the contrary, it tried to include them into “a greater Chinese nationalism” (Baranovitch 2003, p. 233). The same strategy was and is also used towards voices from those belonging to officially recognized minorities. Contestants such as Moxi Zishi (Yi minority) and Wuladuoen (Man minority) are welcomed in *SOC*. Therefore, *SOC* claims that the program helps to deliver original musicians to the Chinese-speaking music scene which can also be understood as being part of the pan-Chinese music culture. Mainland China, which is represented by CCTV, is basically said to be a center, a drive of this music culture.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

As shown in the background section, my main interest of study lies in reality TV, especially Chinese reality music talent shows, and their relationship with Chinese society and politics. At the same time, the focus of the research is the transmission of norms. Therefore, in order to guide and locate my research, I will discuss previous researches that are related to my interest.

There are writings that have helped give me an overview of Chinese reality TV. There are, however, not many books written in Chinese that deal with reality TV. Some deal, for example, with the detailed behind the scenes production of *The Voice of China* (Zhejiang TV *The Voice of China* team 2013) by discussing the types, rules, narrative strategies, development and the marketing of reality TV in general (Lu, Ran and Yin 2006; Chen and Xie 2007). In the west, there seems to have been no book written solely about Chinese reality TV, but several articles feature discussion on the subject. Jeroen de Kloet and Stefan Landsberger (2012) offered a good overview of one particular show, *Super Girls Voice*, that looked at the show as a story about the process of globalization, and they captured the meaning of the show by examining it from different angles such as technology, money, authenticity, morality and democracy. They also noted that the show reinforced the status quo, and that the behavior of fans, contestants, politicians, western and Chinese journalists all fitted right in with their typical positions and thereby did not challenge the status quo. The show itself, and the fuzz that was generated around it, displayed that the state had a clear grasp of commercialization and individualization. This study inspired me to pay attention to the power relationship in and around reality TV, but the analysis is general without much detailed empirical analysis.

There are also many writings dealing with Chinese reality TV in smaller angles. I used the database of China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) to find journal articles, master and PhD theses written in Chinese. When I searched for “reality TV” in all the “titles” I found 1166 journal articles, 182 master theses and 1 PhD thesis. The studies started in 2001 after the first reality TV show in China, *Survival Challenge*, premiered and thrived after *SGV*.

Several articles dealt with the concept of the “reality” of reality TV. The authors praised “successfully appearing real” as a necessary condition for reality TV to be meaningful or successful, but they did not present critical opinions towards the concept of “reality”. One Chinese-written article offered a slightly different view. Wang (2009) argued that “rituals” and “misunderstanding” can cause the appearance of “the third space” (an imaginary place where the audience have fantasies about reality, and they worship the contestants as idols) between reality TV and the audience. This, in return, is part of reality TV's appeal and is part of what makes the genre so popular. The “reality” in reality TV is just a reflection of this third space. Wang also mentioned that the third space's key is the reproduction of the dream of becoming a celebrity, the reproduction of celebrities, and the reproduction of celebrity-making programs. His argument is interesting as he pointed out that the so-called reality is not actually real, that reality TV's effectiveness comes from the intersection of performance and the audience's imagination. He furthermore states that the reproduction of certain categories exists, but the concept of, for example, “misunderstanding”, was not explained with convincing research on the audience. My research is not particularly concerned with the audience's actual beliefs and why they love the shows, but I rather focus on the reproduction and the legitimizing of categories through rituals and ritualization.

Li Li's book (2012) attempts to see reality TV as “spectacle” and a “game” which can be unraveled by analyzing its “rules”, and through this analysis, the author expects to understand the relationship between this spectacle and society. Reality TV, or this spectacle, he argues, are reflections or metaphors of culture and can guide people's behavior. And in the end the author tries to give suggestions on how the producers should make the rules in order to make the programs more attractive. There are some hints of the discussion of norms such as how the contestants of the game are supposed to act in order to win, but the discussion is neither systematic nor critical of the naturalization of media's power. My research, however, does not see reality TV as a “reflection” of anything in itself, but rather as a social process, and I will systematically study the norms of one particular show while being critical of the naturalization of power instead of, unlike what Li Li did in his book, helping the enforcement

of that power through advice on how to make the programs more appealing.

Other articles concerning reality TV discussed: (1) In regard to the localization of reality TV, what the programs have done and what they should do creatively in order to attract Chinese audiences instead of completely regurgitating what had previously been done in the West; (2) The audience's acceptance of reality TV, discussing how reality TV may reflect or influence the audience's values and tastes; (3) Representation of female, children, etc. that touch upon the issue of power. My research uses the localization of reality TV in China as context, but I will also point out the attempt to globalize Chinese reality TV and culture, an aspect that has rarely been discussed. And my study, too, is also concerned with reality TV's influence on its audience, but unlike what was done in numerous articles written by Chinese authors, I do not emphatically study the audience nor do I make value judgments on what is or should be considered as "good" or "bad". When it comes to the representation of people on TV, I do not only care about what is shown and the power relationships, but also exactly how that power is reinforced. That can occur, for example, through a ritual itself and the transmission of norms through rituals.

In English-written articles, the most used angle is the inequality between agencies or the uneven power that these agencies hold. For example, Miaoju Jian & Chang-de Liu (2009) and Ling Yang (2009) wrote about cheap and unpaid labor of fans of *SGV*'s contestants, saying that a large group of fans could challenge the inequality between the industry and fans, but at same time, the fans' free labor was exploited by the industry. Furthermore, scholars also did research on whether *SGV* implied cultural and political democracy in China. Huang (2014) noted some resistant acts and strategies against official requirements or criticism during and after *SGV*, and he pointed out the increasing desire of youth to break away from the official ideology. Meng (2009) was, however, not optimistic about the popular democratic assumption of the show. She did a systematic contextualized analysis on *SGV*, through the political economy perspective, seeing the program as a "media spectacle", and arguing that this spectacle helped reinforce the power structures; the state naturalized its position as the controller of the market, and the media naturalized its power as a special place to access reality. Meng's writing was apparently

influenced by media theorists such as Mark Andrejevic, Nick Couldry and James Carey. The work by these people has also inspired my thesis, but the concept of “media spectacle” seems to separate *SGV* from daily life while this thesis is done with awareness of the media power that is at work in both media and everyday life, together forming a complex ritual space of media.

Li Cui and Francis L. F. Lee (2010) followed in the footsteps of Meng, but their focus is instead on the “negotiation of power” through the show. Based on secondhand information of the program and through focus group study of the audience, they examined how *SGV* and the audience dealt with the symbolic boundary between media and the ordinary world. They noted that by letting non-professionals, even for a short period, cross the boundary between media and the ordinary world could satisfy the audience. But at same time the opening and closing of this symbolic boundary reinforced this very boundary because, in the end, being extraordinary/being presented in the media was loved by the audience. However, by shortly opening this boundary, HSTV challenged the power of CCTV and reinforced its own power, and in the process of doing so it became evident that it is difficult for CCTV or the state to continuously hold their superior power firmly in a country as large and populous as China. My thesis, on the contrary, is about how CCTV stroke back on local TV and, to some degree, restored its power through *SOC*. My focus is on how this was achieved through *SOC*'s subtle play with media rituals, besides the administrative orders that had been placed on restraining shows produced by local TV stations.

Having discussed the subjects and angles on Chinese reality TV both written in English and Chinese, I will now summarize my possible contribution to this field. My thesis, in continuation of the above English writings, will deal further with the negotiation, reinforcement and naturalization of power, a point that was virtually ignored in the Chinese-language researches. My thesis can also contribute further to the study by offering a fresh take. For I will analyze, in order to see what the new characteristics and development of Chinese reality pop shows are, what is actually shown on the screen in one specific recent successful music talent show that was produced by CCTV and not by a local TV station.

Included in my study is an examination of how, or in what way, recent Chinese reality pop shows may influence society.

My theoretical tools are the theories of media ritual and social norm. I will briefly talk about the writings that offered me perspectives on these theories in terms of TV programs. As far as Chinese TV is concerned, the annual CCTV program *Spring Festival Gala* was probably discussed mostly through the theory of ritual, but the writers of those studies looked at ritual through a functionalist angle, meaning that the ritual of *Gala* helped to integrate Chinese society (Gao 2012; Lu 2009). A master's thesis (Ning 2014) that was written in Chinese used media ritual to analyze music talent shows, but it also ended up summarizing the integral function of the rituals. As I am inspired by the writings I listed above, my focus will be on power and not on function, because it is frankly difficult to measure or prove the function. When it comes to social norms, I found one article in Chinese that strongly supports that reality TV should be governed by the government and that it should be restrained within social norms that are “good” for Chinese people (Hu 2007).

Therefore, as we can see, analyses on the relationship that exists between media ritual and social norms are lacking in China. However, this angle can be seen in analyses of reality TV in the West. Carah (2012) used the theory of media ritual to discuss the new strategy of *Australia Idol* to increase its rating, and how the criteria of rock ideology (how a rock musician should be) was used in media rituals in order to evaluate the contestants and establish the credibility of the show. Redden (2008) wrote about how recent talent shows that combined elements of lifestyle TV (about changing and improving people) and reality TV put the contestants under scrutiny of professional judges and articulated the life transformation of the contestants. He criticized that this kind of show did not promote democratization, but meritocracy and inequality that were embedded in the neoliberal cultural economy. Couldry (2009) did ritual analysis on gamedoc shows, revealing how these shows naturalized surveillance, and though these shows claimed they presented reality, the behavioral norms in front of the cameras are different from those outside of the cameras. In another article, still criticizing the naturalization of surveillance, Couldry (2008) wrote about the connection

between gamedoc form and the behavioral norms of the neoliberal workplace, and he called gamedocs such as *Big Brother* “the secret theater of neoliberalism”, where the truths of neoliberal values are acceptably enacted through the rituals. Ouelette (2009) addressed similar points, stating that gamedoc shows had a trend to construct neoliberal “good citizenship”, but he also connected media authority to the American state’s authority. That means that reality shows worked as part of the governmental process and served to train the citizens to do what they should without the supervision or guide from the state. Last but not least, Strano’s (2006) study on how memory is ritualized through wedding photography and how social norms are perpetuated and negotiated by individuals through rituals is relevant and inspiring. For, as I noticed, photo cameras can serve the same function as TV cameras in the sense that they both contribute to separate constructed reality from actual reality. What I can borrow from these studies and use in my study of Chinese reality TV is the way those studies connect media ritual with social norm and how they analyze them together. As such an angle has rarely been used in prior analyses of reality pop shows, my thesis will offer such a perspective. And as China differs strongly from western societies, for example by not being democratic, my study may also show some different norms from those the western shows transmitted.

Chapter 4: Theory and Methods

4.1 Media Ritual

The definition of ritual

Before talking about media ritual, it is necessary to explain how the notion of ritual has been studied. Ritual has always been one of the central notions of anthropology, and different theorists have developed their own definitions of it. Ritual was heavily studied in relation to religion. It can mean “formal activities happening in the course of religious worship” (Huang 2003, p. 191). The relationship between the concepts of religion, ritual and religious beliefs were problematic. However, William Robertsen Smith’s theory in *The Religion of Semites* became an inspiration for many scholars: religion is expressed through the form of ritual, which means that religion is acted, not thought (Sumiala 2013, p. 25). This view was developed fully by French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, divided religion into two categories: beliefs and rites. Rites could be defined only in regards to their object, whereas in beliefs “the special nature of this object” (Durkheim 208, p. 36) was expressed. Today, ritual is generally considered as a form of social action. That means it is different from ideas or feelings (Rappaport 1999, p. 38). Furthermore, in anthropology the concept of ritual has extended beyond religious rituals. Elizabeth S. Evans (1996) noted that ritual’s contemporary use in anthropology identifies “formal, patterned, and stereotyped public performances.” In addition to being formal and patterned action, ritual is also considered to involve transcendent values. (Couldry 2003, p. 3) For example, in the context of Chinese traditional culture, ritual practice of ancestor worship, such as offering food and burning fake money in front of a dead ancestor's grave, reflects a sense that deceased people go on existing, and can influence the living family members’ lives and fortunes based on what the living people do.

The effect of ritual

In terms of the effect of ritual, in Durkheim's (2012) view, rituals play an important role in social integration and consolidation. To him, rituals are dramatizing collective representations and play an important role in social integration and consolidation. "In ritual action (...) There is a sense that wider values of sociality are at stake: ritual deal in some sense with what it is we have in common as members of society" (Couldry 2003, p. 26).

This model of ritual has been a foundation for a functional reading of religion and ritual. Some functionalists tend to see social solidarity as "a requirement of society" and ritual as "an indispensable element in the creation of that solidarity" (Bell 1992 p. 171). Later, anthropologists came out from Durkheimian tradition such as van Gennep and Victor Turner developed their own approaches to ritual. Gennep (1977) analyzed the structure of ritual through *The Rites of Passage*. He used the term "liminal" to identify the boundary crossed in rites. For example, the boundary between boyhood and manhood, or between the people who have made their pilgrimage and those who have not. And according to Turner (1974), bringing solidarity to the society was just a part of ritual's function. Ritual also has a social transforming power, which can temporarily dissolve social hierarchies, remake personal identity, engender cultural creativity, and in the end lead to conflict resolution and social equilibrium.

The above two points emphasized the function that ritual can help restore social order. Other theorists, however, focus on conflict and power instead. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposed the practice theory. Practice theorists see ritual as practice and studied how ritual keeps producing and constructing social and culture environment. Their interest was in the political relationship in everyday social life, for example the power hierarchy. Bourdieu (1991), discussing both van Gennep and Turner's research, argued that what matters is not how transition is made through ritual but the boundaries that are crossed in ritual. Through ritual actions these boundaries are repeatedly legitimated and appear natural. Ritual reinforces

not so much ritual's content but the boundaries within which everyone have to act. This point of view was important to the development of the concept of ritualization and media ritual.

Ritualization and power

There was a shift in ritual study which turned attention to ritualization and power from what ritual expresses or means. American anthropologist Catherine Bell (1992) summarized some problems in ritual studies. In order to break free from those problems and really see how ritual works and the link between ritual action and wider social context, she proposed the need to develop the concept of "ritualization" as a practice.

Ritualization was first employed by Gluckman and Huxley to extend the traditional meaning of ritual that is associated with religion. More recent studies of ritualization paid attention to the emergence of ritual forms in technologically advanced societies. Ritual is seen as a type of social strategy and is related to social control and social communication. Ritualization is said to involve the formal "modeling" (Bell 1992, p. 89) of valued relationships so as to promote legitimation and internalization of those relations and values.

Bell, drawing on these perspectives and Bourdieu's theory of practice, argues that by producing ritualized acts, ritualization distinguishes itself as more important or powerful. It is "a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities" (Bell 1992, p. 74). Also, ritualization "can be described as the strategic production of expedient schemes that structure an environment in such a way that the environment appears to be the source of the schemes and their values" (Bell 1992, p.140). This environment "constructed and reconstructed by the actions of the social agents within it, provides an experience of the objective reality of the embodied subjective schemes that have created it" (Bell 1992, p. 141). Social agents were given some ritual mastery, which can reinterpret reality in a way that gives experiences and perceptions a hegemonic order. Ritualization does not really "control" individuals or society.

Instead it legitimates an ordering of power and make people assume that that is how things really are.

Media ritual and the ritual space of media

Analyses of media ritual thrived from American media theorist James Carey's (1992) "ritual view of communication". Carey shared Durkheim's concern of social order. He argued that we should turn our attention from the traditional transmission view of communication to the ritual view of communication. The former focuses on the extension of messages in space and imparts information while the latter focuses on the maintenance of society in time and the representation of shared beliefs (Carey 1992, p. 15-18). Carey also differentiated his analysis from the Durkheimian functionalist approach and stressed the question of power. He wrote: "Reality is a scarce resource (...) the fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate, and display that resource" (Carey 1992, p. 87), and that "communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (Carey 1992, p. 23).

There are many scholars who have studied ritual related to media, but I found media sociologist Nick Couldry's approach to be the most relevant and powerful in relation to what I want to explore in this thesis. Couldry noted that though Carey's "ritual" analysis of communication is significant and inspiring for media ritual study, it lacked "the model of the structured patterns" (Couldry 2003, p.19) through which we accept the power of media to define reality. To reveal the mechanism behind media's power of constructing reality, drawing on the work of Durkheim, Turner and Bourdieu, Couldry developed a critical approach to media ritual, which he called a post-Durkheim and non-functionalist approach. In *Media Ritual: A Critical Approach* (2003, p. 29) he describes the model of media rituals as "formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance frames, or suggests a connection with, wider media-related values." Later, he defines media rituals as "condensed forms of action that work with particular intensity upon

category distinctions and boundaries related to the myth of the mediated center” (2012, p. 67).

At first, he summarized (2003, p. 3) the three broad understandings of ritual in anthropology: habitual action, formalized action and action involving transcendent values. He combined the latter two and emphasized ritual as formalized, patterned *action* that involve broad transcendent values. When it comes to studying the transcendent values, he drew on the theory of ritualization that was developed by Bell in order to explore the “ritual space of media” (Coudry 2003, p. 13) that makes media ritual’s existence possible. What is at work in the “ritual space of media” is ritualization, and the focus here is the reproduction of patterns, categories and boundaries in all kinds of activities in daily life that are the basis of media ritual.

Under the context of media, what is centrally privileged is the activities that go on in the media compared to those outside of the media. Ritualization, as a categorizing practice in everyday life, not just for some particularly special incidents, organizes all kinds of social actions around media-related categories such as “celebrity”, “liveness”, “reality”, etc.. An example is when a celebrity enters a room everybody will turn to see him/her, in other words an act motivated by the boundary between celebrity (in the media) and ordinary people (not in the media). Ritualization lets us experience the environment it constructs as reality, and by reproducing these categories, it naturalizes the power of the media as the “center” of society. As Coudry puts it, rituals are “naturalized, stable forms for reproducing power relations” (2009, p. 87) while ritualization is a wider social process through which “the categories underlying such power relations become naturalized in action, thoughts and words.”

At the same time, he specifically linked media and ritual. By “media”, he refers not to any media or process of mediation, but to “central media” such as television, radio, press and communication via internet, through which people imagine themselves to be connected to the world (Coudry 2003, p. 2). He also explained some key concepts that relate to his model of media ritual. The concepts includes media, category, boundary and framing.

By “category”, he means it is “a stable principle that enables one term to be regularly differentiated from another” (Couldry 2012, p. 73). This view seems to be inspired by Durkheim who argued “our experiences of being connected as members of a social world are at the root of our most important categorizations of that world” (Couldry 2003, p.6). For example, he divided world of beliefs into two aspects: sacred and profane (Durkheim 2012, p. 37). People attend ritual meetings that represent the sacred and protected, isolating the sacred from the profane. Through such categorizations like the sacred/profane distinction, social life is organized.

Starting from this viewpoint, we can wonder and examine whether there are such media-related categorization taking place in our everyday lives that organizes our social lives. According to Couldry, in media rituals, categories of thought that naturalizes media power are acted out: “Categories do more than organize practices; categories ensure that practices become learned in a form that is obligatory” (2012, p.74). And through the persistent reproduction of categories, some kind of durable inequality is built. The most basic category difference, according to him (2003, p. 27), is constructed between person/thing/world that are in the media (sacred) and person/thing/world (profane) that are not in the media. There are also secondary categories the media use to construct their higher status such as “liveness” (when something is broadcast simultaneously), “reality” (whatever the media is presented as being reality), “celebrity”, etc. It is through these categories people understand their feelings and actions related to media.

By “boundary”, he refers to what is between these categories. This concept is borrowed from Bourdieu’s (1991) rites of institution. Bourdieu did not emphasize the transition of individuals in the rituals or the content of the ritual but the lines or boundaries crossed. For example, in the rites of passage to manhood, the boundary between boy and man is crossed. And as women can not even cross this border, the separation between woman and man is naturalized through the reproduction of this boundary (Couldry 2003, p. 28). These kind of boundaries make people aware of the limits and naturalize the division of people and things.

It is through the mechanism of media ritual that these categories and boundaries are reproduced, thereby the “myth of the mediated center”, “the belief, or assumption, that there is a center to the social world” and that the media “speaks ‘for’” the center is naturalized (Couldry 2003, p. 2).

By “frame”, Couldry refers to the way media ritual connects with wider social values. To link frame with social values is not new. It was widely mentioned by frame theorists. Frame theory has been used to examine how individuals perceive the world. The term was originally from Gregory Bateson (1973) and was developed by sociologist Erving Goffman. In his *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, which is mainly interested in the organization of an individual’s experience, he described frame as such: “I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principals of organization which govern events (...) and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify” (Goffman 1986, p. 10-11).

To him, reality is how people perceive and define the situation, and frames are the basic cognitive structure that guide people to perceive reality. Frames are unconsciously adopted into communicative processes instead of consciously constructed. Todd Gitlin elaborated frames as “principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (1980, p. 6). Still, frame is difficult to be identified and appears vague. Gradually scholars started to conceptualize frame as more consciously produced and constructed, especially in media studies. According to Robert Entman, verb frame or framing “refers to the process of selecting and highlighting some aspect of a perceived, and enhancing the salience of an interpretation and evaluation of that reality” (Entman 2004, p. 26).

Couldry (2003, p. 26) noted that many writers have emphasized the idea that ritual is a means to “frame” our attention to wider values. Through ritual form the legitimacy of assumed wider values can be confirmed and communicated. He argued, in the context of ritual, framing works as follows:

- 1 The actions comprising rituals are structured around certain categories and/or boundaries.
- 2 Those categories suggest, or stand in for, an underlying value.
- 3 This “value” captures our sense that the social is at stake in the ritual. (2003, p. 26)

He gave an example (2006, p. 23) of ritual in media, ritualized meetings with celebrities that are constructed on the distinction between media people and non-media people. Framing here is this distinction that reproduces a wider hierarchy between people/things in the media and those not in the media, and this legitimized hierarchy reinforces the specialty of the media and implies that things/people in the media stand for something important, central about our society.

Couldry’s framework of media ritual and ritualization is helpful for my thesis, and I will summarize how his framework connects with my analysis later. In the next section, I shall discuss the connection of media ritual, ritualization and social norms. The reason for bringing social norms in media ritual is that my study is concerned with reality TV’s connection with questions of wider power and government (Who is behind the “myth of social center”?), and how individuals are influenced in the rituals. Couldry wrote about ritualized norms in the gamedoc show *Big Brother*, which has served as inspiration. But he did not mention how rituals, in itself, can transmit and reinforce social norms that can naturalize power. Next, I will discuss his writing and develop one more perspective on ritual and social norm of this thesis.

4.2 Ritual transmission of social norms

Before connecting ritual with social norms, I will try to explain what social norms are. Scholars from different fields have studied social norms, such as how they come into being, their functions, etc.. For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on what social norms are and how they are transmitted. Social norms are born in the interactions between people and are not planned (Bicchieri and Muldoon 2004). According to Cristina Bicchieri, social norms are “the grammar of society”, and “like a grammar, a system of norms specifies what is

acceptable and what is not in a social group” (Bicchieri 2006, p. ix).

By comparing social norms with other similar terms, we may get a better understanding of this vague definition. At first, unlike legal rules, social norms are informal and not enforced by formal sanctions (Bicchieri 2006, p. 8). If there are sanctions, they are formal. Secondly, social norms are different from conventions. Social norms are said to have more moral weight than conventions. Failing to follow conventions leads to failing to cooperate with others in a group, while violating social norms leads to other people’s distrust and doubt on a person’s reputation (Rossano 2012). Conforming to social norms is supposed to lead to gaining the respect of others. Lastly, social norms do not equal moral rules. The difference is that conformity to social norms is inherently linked to expectations of how other people behave and think, while conformity to moral rules does not necessarily involve the same thing. Put differently, social norms refer to people’s belief about what everybody ought to do, and conformity to social norms involve wanting to gain acceptance and wanting to avoiding sanctions from other people in a group.

We can find the existence of social norms in reality TV where the contestants need to comply with some norms in order to go on staying in the program. Couldry wrote about ritualized norms in gamedoc show *Big Brother* (season 3). Having been inspired by Foucault’s theory of governmentality, whereby “power is reproduced through norms not just of control but also of expression and self-definition” (Couldry 2009, p.83), he set out to discuss the media self (behavioral norms) that were developed in *BB3* and its social consequence. He argued that through the wider process of ritualization, “the categories underlying those power relations *become* naturalized in action, thought and words” (2009, p.87). This means that people comply with certain behavioral norms that naturalize the categories that reinforce the power of the media. In the context of *BB3*, the norm of acting positive for the camera naturalized surveillance’s status as a special mode to access the reality. And in *BB3*, the contests were shown “governed” through particular behavioral norms, and the audience were also “governed” through watching “the unreflexive naturalization of particular behavioral norms” (2009, p. 83).

Couldry's focus is through ritualization, how norms were developed through everyday actions, through words in a gamedoc show. This will help my analysis, and I will discuss its connection with *SOC* in the next section. But now I will explain another angle which is looking at how media rituals, these formalized stable forms, transmit norms, and how these norms connect with power and government.

Rossano (2012) argues that there are 3 ways that rituals transmit social norms. At first, rituals that involve lots of people dancing, chanting or acting synchronously can bind people emotionally, thereby a strong sense of group identity is promoted. In terms of this thesis, it is difficult to prove how the rituals bind the contestants together emotionally as I cannot examine how they truly feel. Secondly, ritual can indicate the performer's state of mind and serve as a signal that the performer commits to some values truly and strongly, especially when the ritual involves doing something at a great cost. This point might be within the scale of psychology but is out of reach for this thesis because I can not analyze what a performer's stage of mind is. At last, ritual can function as representations and reminders of social norms. As Rossano summarizes:

By isolating specific actions and treating them as ends themselves apart from any instrumental goal they produce, ritualized actions become representations - that is, they represent idealized forms of how something should be done, and that form carries important meaning. (...) The ritualized action is an end unto itself, that end being the representation of a social norm. (2012, p. 540)

My focus will be on how "ritual can function as representations" in the last point in which rituals, as I emphasized earlier, are treated as actions and that they can represent social norms.

Eric W. Rothenbuhler pointed out that ritual "do not accurately describe the world in which they occur" but are "occasions for imagining how things could be or evaluation of how they ought to be" (1998, p.15). Therefore, rituals can be understood as negotiation between how things are and how things ought to be. Therefore, certain social norms that reinforce the

existing power can be perpetuated and standardized through rituals, even if the participants have doubts or if they do not behave according to the norms in daily life.

Though naturalized social norms can “govern” people, whether or not people will internalize norms transmitted through ritual is difficult to measure. The separation between the ideal that rituals represent and what actually occurs in the world makes rituals a means to perpetuate social norms without the performers actually complying to them. Strano addresses another dimension of ritual that is relevant to my thesis: rituals are performances. According to her (2006), performing for an audience seeks the audience’s approval and avoids their disapproval, which means they will comply with the social norms in front of the public, being aware of social sanction. What these performances show is symbolic compliance to the norms.

Performers do not have to really believe in the norms to participate. Even if the performers do not completely believe in rituals, their participation and what the ritual itself communicates cannot be fake (Rothenbuhler 1998. p. 62). Also because of the presence of the television camera, the program claim to present reality, thereby preserve this symbolic compliance as evidence, which makes compliance more convincing to the audience. Strano (2006) addresses the role of visual media and writes : “[t]ransmission of social norms has less to do with internalizing norms than it does with displaying evidence of normative behavior to public and private audience.”

4.3 Media ritual, social norm, and *The Song of China*

As I mentioned in the section above, there will be two focuses on my study of the norms of *SOC*: media rituals (stable formalized forms) and ritualization (not formalized words and actions). Media rituals are “the whole range of situations where media themselves ‘stand in’, or appear to ‘stand in’, for something wider, something linked to the fundamental organizational level on which we are, or imagine ourselves to be, connected as members of a society.” (Couldry 2003, p. 4) The media rituals and ritualization of *SOC* are supposed to be symptomatic of the wider situation of Chinese political and popular culture.

SOC can be seen as consisting of several media rituals, for example, the ritual of “the mentors’ expert comments”. It is organized around the boundary between the mentors (celebrities, professional musicians in the program) and the students (ordinary people and musicians outside of the program). This distinction reproduces a wider hierarchy between musicians/people in the program and those not in it, and this legitimized hierarchy implies that the mentors, along with what they say stand for, say something essential about music or our social lives. Thus, the ritual reinforces the special status and power of the program (or the channel that presents this program, CCTV) itself, for example, as a credible place for presenting good Chinese music and musicians. And these rituals can transmit and naturalize the social norms that reinforce the existing power if the existing power owner promotes those norms in general.

SOC is also a space of ritualization where the contestants’ personal behaviors, their words, facial expressions and musical performances were continuously tested, analyzed, electively displayed and evaluated in order to be considered good and proper for this program. Under the naturalization of the authority of the mentors, the contestants/students had to behave or talk in certain ways in order to remain in the program instead of having to leave. The mentors also said things and acted in certain ways that reproduced and naturalized media-related categories. I will analyze the behaviors and the words of the participants in *SOC* and sort out these ritualized social norms.

4.4 Method of Visual Analysis

As my object of analysis is a television program that consisted of images and sounds, I turned to methods of visual analysis that treat images, no matter still or moving, as its objects.

According to Dr. Gillian Rose (2001), there are supposed to be 3 sites for interpreting visual materials: sites of production, sites of audiencing and sites of image itself. My object of study fell into the last site, namely what is actually portrayed on screen. I generally agree with

Rose's critical approach to the visual methodology which states that we should see images as being articulated through practices, technology and knowledge, and hence pay attention to the social practices and the effects of the image. Not seeing society as a pure background or context against which we study an object but seeing the production of the text as a social practice is an important feature of culture studies (Lister and Wells 2001). In terms of *SOC*, my interest lied in both how the program was shown and the influence the program might have had on how Chinese people regard themselves as members of Chinese society. Moreover, as the thesis is about the meaning and interpretation of *SOC*, studying how norms of good Chinese music were transmitted and what these norms might be, generally qualitative analysis and content analysis were adopted in the research.

According to Bell, "making generalizations about the relative frequencies of visual representations of particular classes of people, actions, roles, situations or events involves implicit or explicit classification and quantification of media-circulated content" (2001, p. 10). Content analysis is a basic way to find something about the media's meaning and to make statements about representation. Content analysis is "an empirical (observational) and objective procedure for quantifying recorded 'audio-visual' (including verbal) representation using reliable, explicitly defined categories ('values' on independent 'variables')" (Bell 2001, p.13). To make this simpler to understand, Rose (2001) pointed out clearly the basic procedure of doing content analysis: "The method of content analysis is based on counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined sample of images, and then analyzing those frequencies." And there are 4 explicit steps to follow: finding the image samples that are appropriate to the research questions, devising the categories for coding, coding the images, analyzing the result (56-66). Content analysis involves several quantitative procedures, so it was sometimes criticized because it could not deal with the cultural meanings of the images well enough. However, some still thought that content analysis could be successful and valid if the link between the object of the study and the wider social cultural context can be well-made (Rose 2001, p.55). Content analysis can contain qualitative interpretation, and it can achieve empirical results by analyzing a large amount of data.

Next, I will follow the 4 steps that Rose proposed to do the context analysis on *SOC*. As I wanted to see the program through the prism of media ritual, I would have to examine how the program's images and sounds were organized and presented on the screen, how the participants were represented, and decide what could be identified as media rituals or media ritualization. According to the definition and characteristics of ritual, I needed to systematically observe the procedures that seemed formalized, patterned and repetitive in the program.

There was no need to select sample images as my object is explicit: *SOC* (season 1). The program has also finished broadcasting season 2 at this point, and it was originally aired from February 1st to March 13th in 2015. Because I have limited time at my disposal, I only watched the second season of the program without collecting data from it. However, the main structures and settings were inherited from season 1, so I think that limiting my study to season 1 does not affect making valid statements, both general and specific, on this type of show. *SOC I* lasted from January 3rd, 2014 to March 21st, 2014, being broadcast every Friday night (except for February 14th) on CCTV 3. There were in total 11 episodes: episodes 1 to 6 were blind auditions, episodes 7 to 10 centered around the semi-final while episode 11 featured the final. I watched the show for the first time purely out of interest, and mostly became familiar with the atmosphere, the procedures, the participants' roles and the songs themselves.

Next, I went through the episodes, and tried to write down a transcript of every episode. During this process, I tried to describe the images by using words such as frames, shots, cuts, sounds. I also wrote down a transcript of all the speeches and the texts on screen. The purpose of doing this was to attempt to categorize the scenes by finding out ritualized actions. Nick Couldry (2003, p. 51) suggested we could look for sites such as:

- where people crossed from non-media world to a studio or media production place
- sites where people should encounter celebrities or things in the media
- moments where people perform for the media.

He (2003, p. 52) also suggested we should pay attention to ritualized actions people would do in media that naturalized media as access to the center of society, for example:

- people either holding back, or rushing forward, at the sight of a celebrity
- people holding back before they enter a place connected with the media, so as to emphasize the boundary they cross by entering it
- performances by media people that acknowledge their own specialness before a crowd of non-media people;
- performances by non-media people in certain types of formalized media context, such as a talk show.

In addition, Rose (2001) proposed that the categories should be exhaustive, excluding and enlightening. I understood it as every episode should be covered by at least one category; every category should be different from each other; the categories should relate to the research questions and be interesting. Hence, I broke down the scenes into categories as following:

- the contestants and the guests walking into the audition building, pointing to it, seeming happy and excited
- the contestants talking about themselves in front of the camera and the mentors
- the contestants being given “special” rights to ask the mentors questions
- the contestants performing during blind audition and the mentors pushing handles in order to select what they deem to be good songs
- the mentors commenting on the contestants after their performances
- the contestants displaying surprise, gratefulness or see them crying after being selected
- the guests (family, friends) talking about the contestants in front of the camera
- the contestants being taught and cultivated by the mentors backstage
- voice-overs praising or defining the contestants while they were walking off the stage
- the host commenting on how incredible the changes were that happened to the contestants, etc.

- the mentors introducing their concepts and how the contestants fit into their expectations
- the contestants acting in scenes that were trying to recreate their daily life
- the contestants acting in scenes that showed special things they did before the final
- the contestants performing with and showing gratefulness, respect, happiness to established musicians

The categories above described the ritualized actions I observed. Next step was coding, which meant to attach these categories to the images. Instead of coding each episode, I coded each stage of the program with the categories: the introduction of the contestants, the blind audition, the semi-final, and the final, because the rituals within each stage were almost the same from episode to episode. This logic of coding is reflected through my plan of the chapters: each chapter is a stage of the show and each section under a chapter is what I consider as a ritual. Analyzing from stage to stage, following the chronological order of the program not only made it easier to read, but also could reflect the change of some norms that could say something about this kind of talent selecting reality pop music show on a Chinese national TV channel.

I scrutinized the ritual actions closely, analyzing each of them based on the theory of ritual, media ritual, the ritual transmission of social norms and power. I organized and wrote about the information on how the rituals were carried out through their participants' labor and all the other visual and audio elements of the rituals.

Then I studied what kind of norms these rituals transmitted and how norms were perpetuated through the performances of rituals that are idealized representations. I coded the norms by analyzing the particular gestures, expressions and words from the participants. For example, in terms of words, when “owe (kuijian, 亏欠)” or “return the favor (baoda, 报答)” were used by the contestants in a situation where the contestants' parents were presented, I consider that the situation communicates the norm of being a filial kid. And in terms of gestures and expressions, when I see the contestants holding their parents' arm or nodding politely or bow to the mentors, I consider that the situation communicates the norm of showing respect. I also

paid attention to individuals that acted the rituals out, for example, how the participants negotiated the difference between their daily life behavior and the norms through rituals. All these usually led to reveal what kind of power structure these rituals and perpetuated norms naturalized, etc.

The advantage of the combination of context analysis with theories is that it is a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis. It can usefully help me classify all the image information, allow me to summarize the regular patterns, and make generalizations about rules. The disadvantage is that my thesis does not concern the production of the program or the audience's acceptance. Also, the context analysis does not involve doing interviews with the people who made it and took part in it, so I would not know how they actually felt and intended. However, as I rely on the theory of ritual that focuses on the social process and cognitive process instead of psychology and actual collective belief, without doing interviews, I can probably still reach my purpose of revealing the mechanism of power reinforcement.

Chapter 5: The Introduction of the Contestants

During the blind-audition round, in episodes 1 to 6, the contestants were introduced. Among the 68 contestants, there were 26 people whose performances were edited into short versions and we only see their names, age, hometown, and occupations on the screen; 9 people were only shown walking onto the stage from backstage and we can see their names, age, hometown and occupation on the screen; the remaining 33 people, however, had relatively full introductions. There might be reasons why 35 people did not get more detailed introductions. For example, it might be because they were not selected by any mentor. But 33 were introduced and presented in such a specific way that they could reflect certain forms and characteristics of the program. Therefore, these 33 people's introductions are the focus of my study in this chapter. These full introductions were especially presented in 2 places: on the red carpet in front of the audition building we can see the contestants walking with their family or friends into the building; in the waiting room inside of the building we can see the portrait of the contestants (self-disclosure/confession and images, guests comments), and the contestants' interactions with their family or friends. I argue that these introductions of the contestants are media rituals as they were formalized, repetitive, and that they constructed the contestants' "ordinariness" by representing them in a particular way.

Through these rituals, the contestants were presented as ordinary individuals more than musicians who have special musical skills or musical ideas. The contestants, by going through the rituals, complied themselves with norms of original musicians who were passionate, determined, serious and hardworking, and norms of social individuals who had close relationships with their families and friends, being caring, reliable and filial.

5.1 Walking into the building

Among the 33 people who had relatively full introductions, 15 of them, from age 16 to 36, were shown walking on the red carpet that led to the entrance of the building of *SOC*'s

audition studio. On the front wall of the building, the golden logo of *Sing My Song* was lit up and hung high. We could see the contestants sometimes pointing to the building with their fingers, seemingly telling each other about it, and they all seemed to be happy and excited. This ritual powerfully marked the stage of *SOC* as a very special place compared to the outside world and, by entering the building, the contestants and their guests crossed the boundary between the ordinary world and the *SOC* world.

Among these 15 people, 8 were shown walking with friends, girlfriends or alone while 7 were shown with their parents. They walked with their parent(s) side by side, holding their parent(s) hand in hand, sometimes arm in arm, smiling happily and talking passionately. The camera gave close-ups to their arms, hands and moments of them talking. Such caring, respectful gestures and closeness with parents were rarely seen or emphasized in western shows like *The Voice* in which lots of the close-ups were given to the contestants' faces instead.



Figure 1. Walking the red carpet.

Above is a typical example of the sequence of walking on the red carpet. Contestant Wang Jinlin is walking closely with his parents, holding his mother's hand, seemingly explaining something about the building to them.

We do not know when the contestants and their guests started to walk on the red carpet, but this process was apparently planned for the show's sake. The scenes looked like a recreation of how it was or should have been in the daily lives of the contestants, with the young ones respectfully making sure that the parents walked closely and carefully, and there was no problem of communicating with each other. The relationships between the contestants and their parents seemed to be full of positiveness, care and love. Through the ideal action of children holding their parents' arm and talking to them while walking, this ritual represented the social norm that children should take care of and be close to their parents.

5.2 Portrait of the contestants

The red carpet led to a bright waiting room where the contestants and their guests were interviewed and their interactions were shot, and where the contestants prepared for the performance. Here came the part where we were supposed to get to know them in detail. I focus on 2 rituals presented in the waiting room session. One is the self-disclosure or confession of the contestants, accompanied by images (photos, on-location videos) that reflected or added more vivid details of what they were saying. On-location videos and waiting-room scenes were shown in a manner where it appears that the contestants were not aware of the camera. However, it is difficult to ignore that the contestants were acting out what was already planned because each contestant's segment consisted of several common elements. Another ritual is that the guests were asked by a host to comment on the contestants that brought them there with the contestant him- or herself sitting nearby listening to what their guests were saying. I consider these 2 procedures as rituals because, firstly, in these mediated confessions, there was a sense that there was a boundary between the ordinary world and the media world. Many contestants expressed that they were very nervous about being in the program since they were going to be on a big stage facing a national audience; Secondly, there was this assumption that the program was an important place where these contestants' private stories were transformed to something representative of the society, as the producer of

SOC, Tian Ming said:

Reality TV reflects people, people's experience and fate that are closely connected with Chinese society and people's life. When we present a contestant's real life situation, he can resonate with a group of people in front of the TV. [The audience] can see themselves on TV, which is the key [to reality TV]. (Tian 2015)

From these confessions, we can get an overall idea about the relationship between the contestants and music, their daily life situations and people who are close to them, and how strong they felt about getting to perform on the stage of *SOC*. In other words, this waiting-room section framed the contestants as ordinary people and musicians that were naturally being themselves. They shared their background and their feelings towards life in general instead of representing them as, for example, artists who share their ideas on their music.

Contestants' self-disclosure and stories in images

At first, the contestants certified themselves as being original musicians by telling their own stories about when they started to write music and how they write music. They sat down in a room, with guitar and drums in the background, and spoke with images accompanying their voices.

Talent that was shown from a young age or somebody having had years of experience in making music was what the contestants used to legitimize themselves as original musicians. Some started writing when they were young: "I started learning to play guitar when I was 10 years-old" (Tu 2013); "I carried a guitar and started singing on the street when I was 14" (Qiu 2013); "I started to write songs when I was 13" (Liu, Bokuan 2013). But most people chased their music dream as adults. Among them, some were Beijing drifters, people who have left their hometown in favor of pursuing their dream in China's capital: "In order to write my own

music, I came to Beijing in 2012” (Wang 2013); “August, 2002, I embarked on a music journey in Beijing on my own” (Liu, Jin2013); “In my twenties I came to Beijing and I have been busy making music” (Zhao 2013). Some were university students or graduates who regarded writing music as a passion and hobby: “I was studying at an economy school, but I was bored and started writing music.” (Suby 2013) The rest were professional composers who write music for movies, TV series and famous singers, and musicians who have their own bands.

While the contestants spoke, images (photos and videos) were shown in order to help form more complete pictures of who these original musicians are; musicians who are capable of writing music and playing instruments, but who have yet to become successful original musicians. However, what matters was their hardworking, positive and determined spirit that was dedicated to their music dream. They were ordinary people with certain virtues.

There were photos showing the contestants making or playing music during daily circumstances. These photos seemed to be taken by unprofessional hands, but clearly showed the contestants’ serious facial expressions when they are looking at the computer or holding their instruments. These photos also displayed the aspiring musicians’ humble living environments. For example, from the photos of Qiu Zhenzhe, we could see him wearing a cartoon costume while standing on the street with just a guitar and an amplifier (Episode 1, 2013)

The impression I get from these and other similar photos is that these people were musicians, but that they could not afford to buy or utilize the best equipment. Furthermore, I am left with the feeling that they were not yet professionals either, because in the photos we could not see them singing, working in professional recording studios or living in spacious homes as successful musicians. Also, several of the contestants seemed to work alone. These photos did not directly show their musical skills or any sign of being successful, but nonetheless reflected their hardworking spirit under what successful musicians might regard as unsatisfactory working and living environments.



Figure 2. Wang Xiaotian sitting at his home.



Figure 3. Wang Xiaotian sitting at his home.

Here (see Fig 2 and Fig 3) are 2 photos of contestant Wang Xiaotian. In the left photo, he is sitting on the bed, in front of his computer and his music equipment in a narrow no-window basement where there is hardly any room for other furniture in addition to the necessary bed, table and closets. In Fig 3, he is listening to CDs played on a CD player. The only valuable things he seems to be in possession of are music-related equipment that does not appear to be

of professional standard.

In addition to the photos, while the contestants were talking, both on-location scenes and scenes shot inside of the waiting room. The on-location scenes, which were shot for 11 contestants, created emotional and seemingly real images of how they naturally acted or were supposed to act in their daily lives. I notice in these on-location videos, the contestants were wearing the same clothes as those they wore on stage, which might imply that during the stage of blind audition, they were still just being their daily, natural selves. Again, the contestants were carefully constructed as being themselves. Some contestants seemed to feel that *SOC* was where they could actually be themselves, too: contestant Liu Jin cheerfully uttered: “Tonight, let me really be myself.”

Scenes of Wuladuoan, Liu Zhongyan, Lu Xianghui, hip-hop group Dewen and Slipper and Su Peiqing focused on the creative sides of their lives. I will use Lu Xianghui’s scenes as an example of what the symbols of the creative process are. She was talking about her experience living in the Hainan province, so the scenes appeared to be a recreation of that. On the screen, she strolled in on a sunny day, smiling, carrying a guitar case on her back. The scene cut to her sitting down under a tree and playing, tapping on her guitar with paper on her lap and pen in her hand, and then she raises her head, facing the sun, closing her eyes, smiling. At last, we could see her sit in a café, drinking coffee and smiling while observing the outside. After a while, she took out a pen and wrote something on a music sheet. In the last close-up shot we could see her writing “composition and lyrics by Lu Xianghui” with smileys on the music sheet. Liu Zhongyan, Su Peiqing and the hip-hop group’s creative process was similarly visualized. The important symbols of their creative process include guitars or computers, music sheets, pen, earphones and the action of writing down something. Furthermore, they appear to not only have romantic and sensitive characteristics as artists, but they also have the ability to write down their inspirations carefully and seriously, something they appear to enjoy a lot.

One thing that I think is worth noticing is the representation of Liu Zhongyan, a songwriter

for a large amount of famous pop songs. He was talking about his experience from *before* he wrote those famous songs for famous pop stars: he liked to carry his guitar to the mountain and try to write and sing songs, and these were the experiences that were made into videos instead of, for example, his current situation as a commercially successful songwriter. From his representation we can see that the contestants were carefully constructed as ordinary and unknown people with creative aspirations.

A less happy and enjoyable creating process was represented by Wuladuo's video. We could see her stay in a space that looks like her bedroom. She was listening to music through earphones, playing a guitar and writing something down on music sheets. She looked very concentrated and was seemingly not aware of the camera. However, she was alone without any audience, and the environment she worked and lived in seemed to be plain and private. A voice-over of her talking was utilized while the video was shown: "I don't talk much and I rarely go outside." As noted, some other contestants were seen in the videos writing their songs outside of their home, but it still looked like they were silent and kept everything to themselves. Their loneliness and ordinariness was shown through the lack of recognition from others, namely the lack of success. In western TV shows such as *The Voice of America* it is normal to show more varied aspects of a contestant's life, including their awards, success, satisfaction, etc..

On the other hand, scenes of the other 6 contestants focused on less musical sides of their lives. Instead, we see them as lonely human beings who were looking for love and understanding from other people. Yet they used music as tool to state their desire. We got to see Jiang Yajia, Zhao Zhao and Tang Xiaokang walk alone on the street, and their outfits and expressions were a good fit for the stories they told. Close-up shots were given to Jiang's leather boots, jeans, piercings and arrogant face when she talked about her conflicted relationship with her parents, who Jiang perceived to have been too busy to pay enough attention to her: "Today I came to *SOC*, hoping my parents really care about what I'm doing and my favorite music." And we could also see Zhao and Tang walking with guitars on their backs, and looking somewhat determined and lost in their own thoughts at same time. This

image suited their stories of, respectively, being a Beijing drifter who rarely got to meet his mom, and a frustrated former hit-single composer who lost his loved ones. Moreover, Zhang Ludi talked about his disappointing relationship with his ex-girlfriend while the cameras were showing him lying on the couch, looking at a thick photo album, and then him looking at the city at night outside of the window. *SOC* also seemed to be the exit of his emotion: “I’ve been escaping for so long. It’s time to walk out of it and sing the song that has been buried in me for so long.”

And as Liu Bokuan called himself a bus driver, the scenes were dedicated to showing him working. In the beginning we could see his slightly exhausted face with little expression when he opened the bus door and drove the bus. Next we heard him talk about love for music and saw the image of him playing guitar while smiling. Like the other 4 contestants, Liu appeared to be somewhat lonely in his daily life too: “I drove a bus for 8 to 9 hours per day. No breaks and no phone calls during the job. But deep inside of me the love for music is hidden.” By contrasting the images with him talking about his love for music, the introduction gave us the impression that he was determined to make his own music and also had a hopeful attitude towards life despite the unsatisfactory reality in which he found himself: “Being in the music world is a kind of happiness nothing can compare to. (...) Writing songs is the only way I can express my true feelings.”

The only contestant that was not alone in the video was Song Yuanyuan as she was shown hanging out and rehearsing with her band members while she was talking about how glad she was to have them helping her. The images in which she and her band members sat on a wall laughing and shouting were evidence of how it matters to be positive and happy and to have somebody close to you who understand and support you.

The guests’ comments

The contestants’ family, friends and girlfriends were presented through interviews, photos and

scenes featuring them interacting with the contestants. These images tied the contestants and their family, friends and girlfriends together tightly, both physically and emotionally. Family-bond, friendship and romantic love shifted our attention from the contestants' musical talents to their ordinary selves.

From the interviews, we learn that the guests were very supportive towards the contestants they accompany. Instead of discussing the music or what they thought about their associates' music, they mostly expressed admiration for the contestants' virtues such as them being hardworking and able to persevere, as if these qualities alone make them deserve some success. The contestants might have worked on music so hard that they appeared distant, both physically and mentally, to their family and friends, but them having individual dreams and working hard was praised anyway. For instance, the friends of Suby said: "She's a little silly but cute. And she works very hard on music." And the friends of Wang Siyuan said: "He's very shy but always working on music himself. He's like a God to us." Mother of Liu Jin commented with worried voice: "She has been in Beijing for 10 years and we only went there once." And Wuladuo's mom commented on her daughter: "She often forgets to eat. Sometimes when I opened the door to her bedroom, I saw her sleeping on the music sheets."

5.3 The presence of the parents backstage

After the contestants entered the building, scenes of interactions between the contestants and the people they bring are shown. Contestants were shown as sons, daughters, wives, husbands, moms, and boy/girlfriends instead of as musicians. Parent-child relationship was especially noticeable. We could repetitively see the representation of close parent-child relationships. 23-year-old Wang Jinlin's mom cut an apple with a knife and shared it with her son, and Wang tried to pass the apple to his father. And 23-year-old Huo Zun who, in the final round, won the title of "Year's Best Chinese Song" and "Year's Best Original Musician", was called by his mom "baby Huo". His mom was shown putting fruit in his mouth, massaging his shoulders and singing along happily while Huo Zun was playing piano. Though these two contestants

were adults, they were presented as children that were taken care of by their mothers. In the screenshot (see Fig 4) we could see Huo Zun being massaged by his mother in the waiting room while hearing his mom say: “Baby Huo has been sticking to me since he was young. As long as I disappeared for a while, he would keep calling ‘mom, mom’”.



Figure 4. Huo Zun’s mom massages his shoulders.

If the contestants did not bring their families to the studio, photos of the contestants with their families were frequently shown instead which expressed strong family bonds instead of emphasizing things related to their music. For example, in the following pictures (see Fig 5 and Fig 6), we can see Zhao Zhao in his childhood with his mom, and then one of this grown-up man reading a book to his old mother.

While the pictures were shown, we could hear Zhao Zhao talk: “I rarely had a chance to go home... Every time I went back, I found that my mom seemed to become a little older.” It was typical to show the contestants as children in old photos with their parents and then photos that were taken after the contestants’ had grown up. The photos and the contestants’ confessions gave us a sense that time had passed but that the bond between the kids and parents remained.



Figure 5. Young Zhao Zhao and his mother in the photo.



Figure 6. Adult Zhao Zhao and his mother in the photo.

Chapter 6: Blind audition

During the blind audition, the mentors sat on chairs in a recording-studio-like space. They were allowed to select their students by only listening to the contestants' performance, and, on screens that were right in front of them to block their view of the contestants, read the song's lyrics. When the mentors wanted to select a song, they pushed the handle in front of them (see Fig 7), and then the yellow "Recording" signs on their chairs were turned on while the screens went down. If only one mentor pushed the handle for someone, he or she had to join that mentor's group. If a few mentors pushed the handle, the contestant could choose which group he or she wanted to join (see Fig 8).



Figure 7. Mentor Liu Huan pushes the handle.

I consider the whole performance of blind audition as a media ritual, because at first, as noted it was a very formalized and repetitive process that every contestant had to take part in. Secondly, it was organized around the category of ordinariness and the boundary between ordinary people and celebrities. Though the blocking screen was claimed to prevent the mentors from seeing the contestants in order to make the mentors choose the music that really moved their hearts, this design still marked the boundary between the ordinary people and

celebrities, because the mentors were celebrities themselves and here their opinions were naturalized as mattering the most, which means that what they said to be good music actually was good music, and they were also naturalized as good musicians themselves. Furthermore, the program itself was legitimized as a place that certify good musicians, a place better and more special than the ordinary world.



Figure 8. 3 mentors push handles for Huo Zun.

However, what I will discuss next are a few secondary media rituals that were carried out during the whole process of the blind audition, especially the period after the contestants were chosen by the mentors. Through these rituals we could see being selected by the mentors, or crossing the boundary between ordinary to not ordinary, had some special meaning, and these rituals naturalized the boundary, too. Furthermore, these rituals transmitted certain norms that reinforced this boundary and the power of the program. As far as I am concerned, the following norms were transmitted through the rituals: being good children who repaid their parents' favors and regained some kind of approval from the parents; being creative in writing music that combined Chinese culture with western music form; acting honest, simple, ambitious about one's own desire while being optimistic and persevering.

6.1 Representation of and comments on parent-child relationships

Being selected and recognized by the mentors marked that the contestants crossed the boundary between being ordinary to being extraordinary, and this boundary was reinforced by the ritual of presenting the parents and commenting on parent-child relationships *after* the contestants had been chosen by the mentors. Because showing the parents and having the contestants commenting on parent-child relationships only mattered after the contestants were selected. (The only time that a disappointed face was shown was when contestant Wang Fei failed to be selected and his wife cried a bit.) And being selected meant a successful transformation of the contestants, which means that they were not ordinary anymore or that they had somewhat finally proven themselves, and this led to the parents being happy and therefore improving the parent-child relationships.

I will continue using Huo Zun as an example. During the blind audition, the shots frequently cut to his mother in the backstage area. When 3 mentors pushed their handles for Huo Zun, she was shown happily clapping her hands, and she was shown crying 3 times while he was singing, too. After his performances, he said that his mother hoped he could “continue (yanxu, 延续) her dream (of being a musician)” because she gave up her musical career to take care of him, and that he stood on the stage “80%” because of his mother. This opinion reflects the Confucian ontology, “which assumes that individuals’ lives are the continuation of their parents’ physical lives” (Liu 2008). Apparently, Huo Zun feels he is in debt to his mom, and he means to repay her favor of bringing him up through having a career as a musician. Therefore, he complies with the norm of being a filial son.

When the mentors asked his mother to come up on stage and sing, she chose to sing “I Only Care About You” because “He (Huo Zun) is the person I care about the most in my life”. Mentor Yang Kun summarized: “Two generations of musicians makes us see the life and the beauty of music.” Here, “the life and beauty of music” was rooted in the good, tight relationship between child and parent in which the parent sacrificed for the child and the child

returned the favor and did what the parent had hoped of him or her.

In addition to Huo Zun, contestant Wang Jinlin was another strong example of making music largely for the sake of his parents. When being asked why he takes part in this show, he says:

In my hometown, many people think this kid in Mr. Wang's family will live his whole life with the help of his parents. But I know (...) what I should do with my life which is to be a singer-songwriter. I stand on this highest stage and sing my song to everyone. I want to tell everyone I don't need my parents to take care of me. I have courage and will work hard, and I'll be able to take care of my parents for a lifetime.

While he was saying this, the scene cut to his parents who were nodding and smiling. From Wang's words, we know that thanks to his mother who gave him a guitar, he conquered tourette syndrome by playing music. As Wang also seemed to be aware of, his performance on national television was symbolic. Having his parents watching him performing in front of a national audience was a representation of a son having the ability to repay and take care of his parents.

As many makeover talent shows, in *SOC* "[P]articipants are positioned as seeker of a better life, not simply wannabe performers" (Redden 2008, p. 135). Therefore, attending blind audition and getting selected by the mentors is supposed to present that the contestants gained a better life than before. Here are 3 contestants who stated that their lives related to their parents changed for them after the blind audition. These conversations occur after the blind audition but they refer to the blind audition:

Cai (M): Have your parents agreed with you?

Jiang (C): There were lots of changes. My parents now call me 12 times per day. They are trying to understand me. My parents are my biggest gain by coming here.

Cai (M): Your smile really looks like it's from your heart... Back then you looked like the whole world didn't understand you but now you look happy.

Hui (C): I want to thank this stage. I've been wanting to get married after 30. After the show was broadcast I took a risk and flew back to my girlfriend's hometown. Her parents finally agreed to let us marry.

Wang Xiaotian: I and my dad often fight and hardly communicate. This time I talked with him about everything and he tried to understand me... My dad is still driving the pedicab... I want to grow up soon and improve his life status.

Host: The biggest success for Wang Xiaotian is not standing on the stage but having a chance to communicate with his dad. They could cry together. This shows a precious relationship between father and son.

It was not unusual for the contestants to mention after their performance that their choice of being a musician did not please their parents. Right after the performances, the contestants above all expressed frustration and even shame towards their parents because they were not successful. Attending the blind audition became a means for some contestants to approve their worth to their parents. The comments above communicated an expectation that getting approval from the established professionals on national television can win the favor from parents. By participating in this "life-change" ritual, these contestants comply with the norm of "seeker for better life", more precisely, seeker for better relationship with parents. Even though it seemed both the contestants and their parents tended to think children's success with their careers is what decides the goodness of the children.

6.2 Commenting on the blind audition

During the blind audition, only the professional judgment of the mentors mattered to the contestants' future because the audience, outside or inside the television screen, did not get to decide anything, whereby the quality of the music was supposed to override other qualities such as how the contestants looked like or how much they might be liked by the audience.

The contestants were scrutinized by the mentors, mainly being evaluated by their values and morality. After the performances, the mentors ritually conducted interviews with the contestants and gave them comments. The mentors asked patterned questions to each contestant such as: “How/Why did you write this song?”; “Why did you come to this stage?”; “What’s your dream in the future?”. After the contestants stated their backgrounds, dreams, efforts, motivations and so on, the mentors used moralistic criteria to evaluate the contestants’ stories and feelings. Through this ritual of interviewing and commenting, we can pick up both the contestants’ self-expectations and the mentors’ preferences on the music and moralistic values.

On music

When it comes to music, being “innovative (*chuangxin*, 创新)” and “special (*tebie*, 特别)” was frequently praised. When some of the contestants explained how or why they wrote the song, we discovered that they liked to try things and experimented with music even if they did not have professional training, which, according to the mentors, would lead to something fresh in the Chinese music scene.

However, there seemed to be a limit on how creative a contestant should be. Contestant Yang Zhongguo used a sampler to record his voices, guitar sounds, and mixed everything up and looped it on the stage, something that was a quite unusual presence on the stage of a music reality show. In the end, no mentor pushed the handle for him. Instead of receiving criticism, his creativity was spoken highly of. Mentor Yang Kun said he had never heard this kind of song, and other mentors kept using words such as “imaginative”, “special”, “creative”, “unique”, “experimental”, “can’t be categorized” to describe him. And “can’t be categorized” seems to be a problem. Mentor Zhou said: “I’ve always been looking for pop songs. I know that a good song doesn’t have to be a pop song, but I’ve restrained myself. I can’t categorize your song.” To answer that, Yang Zhongguo addressed: “I don’t think we have to categorize

music.” Nevertheless, mentor Zhou still tried to categorize the song: “Actually it’s pretty heartfelt (the concept of mentor Yang Kun’s album).” Here we see a conflict between the contestant’s idea of “creativity” and the mentors’. No matter how creative the contestant were or wanted to be, in *SOC*, he had to restrain himself within the expectations the mentors had for their albums in order to advance in the competition.

So what did innovative, special and fresh music or performance mean in terms of the mentors’ views? A common criteria was that the music combined Chinese culture with western or other foreign music forms. Chinese culture could be traditional music, instruments, dressing style, dialects, etc. For instance, contestant Liu Xiangsong’s “Spring is Coming” was praised by mentor Cai Jianya: “I think you are my type. I have always been looking for a song that encounter the Chinese culture with lots of musical elements. (...) I heard lots of innovation in this song.” Liu Xiangsong agreed: “I’m not a professional songwriter. I like putting different ingredients into the songs, just like when I’m cooking. I like constantly trying things.” However, it seemed that Liu was aware that experimentation might lead to an estrangement from the general audience: “I have so many things in my music which makes me anxious. (I hope) the professional mentors can help me to study or evaluate my work so that more people can accept and like my songs.”

A similar conversation occurs after Hu Shasha performed her song “Sing, Chant, Love” which combined Peking opera with Bossa Nova. Though mentor Liu Huan thought there were too many elements in the song, he praised the innovative spirit of it. Mentor Cai explained her happy gestures during the song: “Happy because it’s creative. It breaks the tradition.” This “tradition” probably meant main-stream Chinese pop music that had been copying and following trends in western music. Together with Su Peiqin’s “Incompatible” (a combination of Chinese language vocals, harp and Indian music rhythm pattern), Xie Di’s “I Don’t Go to Work Tomorrow” (hip-hop rapped with Chengdu dialect), Sha Zhou’s “Digging Clams” (hip-hop with Qingdao dialect), Lao Qian’s “I’m Crazy Today” (blues sung with Xi’an dialect), Song Yuanyuan’s “I Am Yes, I Am No” (Chinese rock song with a “rhythm pattern that very few Chinese write with”), Liu and Hu’s songs were considered creative because they

consciously combined the Chinese cultural elements and western musical styles into their music, something that was apparently welcomed by the mentors.

The contestants who were not selected by the mentors are said to be not creative enough. For instance, Jin Hu was not selected during the blind audition, but the mentors expressed regret as his brit-pop (*yinglun yaogun*, 英伦摇滚) style was actually impressive. When he came back to the reborn round “Fight of the lost peals (*yizhu zhi zhan*, 遗珠之战)”, he chose to sing another song which did not apply to the brit-pop style. The mentors, again, did not choose him because they prefer the style of an original song. In terms of contestant Wang Fei, though his rock song was considered “honest, powerful”, mentor Zhou commented on the lack of creativity: “It’s 2014 now but I’m looking for a style that can work in 2015, too.” Mentor Liu Huan chose not to select it because he had already selected songs with the same style.

On virtue

In addition to innovation and creativity, there was another quality apparently preferred by the mentors: a song should somehow reflect a contestant’s true self. Like western music talent shows such as *Pop Idol*, *SOC* also “place the burden of realism onto the representation of the self” (Holmes, 2004). At the stage of the blind audition, the focus of the program was on ordinary people who display real emotions. The main methods *Pop Idol* and *SOC* used to achieve this goal were different: the former uses cameras to catch “the wider performances of the self that takes place around the moments of song - off stage rather than on stage” (Holmes, 2004), while the latter, not being broadcast live, seemed to emphasize on the mentors’ comments on the representation of music and the contestants’ self-disclosure on stage, which was supposed to show the audience who they really were.

After the mentors heard the songs and the contestants’ own stories or explanation of the songs, they often commented on how real (*zhen*, 真) or honest (*zhencheng*, 真诚) the contestants

were because the songs were based on real stories or real feelings that the contestants really wanted to sing about. For instance, after hearing Wang Jinlin's song "Her Mom Doesn't Like Me" and his declaration of having the ability to take care of his own parents, mentor Liu Huan says: "This is the core of music. It expresses the true self (*zhen xingqing*, 真性情). No matter if we are sad or happy, we express the feeling directly (*zhishu qihuai*, 直抒其怀). You are a happy kid so you express happiness." Other contestants, such as Zhang Ling, Jiang Yaojia, Hui Zi, Wang Fei, and Tang Xiaokang were also considered to have written about themselves. Zhang Ling's lyrics were considered "the sounds from his heart". Jiang Yaojia's song that expressed her frustration of not being understood and her love towards parents was praised: "Sing My Song really fits you. She really sings about herself." Hui Zi and his song was said to be "identical to each other (*rengge yizhi*, 人歌一致)" which also meant that he expressed his true feelings.

Furthermore, being oneself was connected to "having backbones (*you guqi*, 有骨气)", moral honesty. After mentor Liu Huan heard the story of Qiu Zhenzhe who was a street musician and wanted to sing his own song, he said: "He has backbones... He just likes singing. He doesn't expect to get anything in return." The mentor authenticated the contestant's self by basically saying that he was completely selfless and ideal when it came to making music.

In addition to expression of true feelings, simplicity, plainness and ordinariness were also supposed to indicate the true self. For example, after Zhou San's performance, mentor Cai described his song as "rice" which is usually "taken for granted" but suddenly there would be one mouthful of rice that makes one cry. Mentor Liu explained the power of ordinariness further:

Sometimes music can go without any discussion on the technical aspect. This song doesn't have anything to do with technique or literature. Calmly expressing what's in your heart is powerful enough... This is the highest state (*zuigao jingjie*, 最高境界)... The truth lies in ordinary life (*pingpingdandan caishi zhen*, 平平淡淡才是真).

Contestant Wang Xiaotian's case also stood out as a success of simplicity. During the blind audition, his lyric which was about the wild cats who kept him company during his more difficult times, was not clearly understood by the mentors and this led to his failure. However, he appeared in the "reborn" stage and this time he was chosen, because it was "honest". Mentor Zhou said: "Simpler songs makes me feel a person is more sincere and reliable (*tashi*, 踏实). Real and honest (*shizai*, 实在)." Mentor Liu drew a conclusion: "All the songs are from people's heart... Both strong feelings or little bits of life can touch people's hearts. This is the power of music."

The ordinariness was upgraded to "the highest state" and something "incredible", which again displayed that ordinariness is a quality that was preferred by the mentors. The mechanism of establishing this norm was by evaluating whether the contestant's self-expression was real or not, the program gave audience an illusionary access to what was the reality of the contestant, and made them ignore the fact that the performance, as presented, was carefully constructed and artificial anyway.

In addition to singing about oneself and what one wanted to express, "sing my song" had another dimension: sing *for* oneself. During the conversations, we hear the contestants state their reasons or motivation for participating in this program. Some of them expressed that their purpose was to prove their own worth, because they had been working for other people and were not recognized by the majority of people as being good musicians.

For instance, Ma Shangyou was an established film music composer but he was apparently not satisfied with that: "I have always produced or written for others. This time I want to do this for myself." Mentor Liu Huan seemed to find this relevant to the program's subject: "This is 'sing my song'. He's already successful but he has something he wants to sing." As another songwriter who had been contributing songs to the most popular and successful pop singers in China, Liu Zhongyan was also not happy with just staying behind the curtain: "I felt I wasn't good enough so I didn't try to perform on stage. Suddenly I turned 50 years old. If I still keep myself from going..." Mentor Yang Kun took the chance to finish the sentence for him: "Live

for yourself. (*wei ziji huo yiba*, 为自己活一把)” Then mentor Liu Huan concluded: “I hope talented composers can show their true value and dignity here. It’s the right decision that you came.” Similar conversations also happened after the performance of contestants Xin Ruotian and Wula Duo. Having felt “not recognized”, they came to this stage to prove the “value of existence”. It seemed that the contestants believed that by going through the ritual of participating in the blind audition, they could display their true selves, be autonomous, take control of what they wanted to do with their talent instead of taking orders from others. Then the mentors’ agreement and encouragement seemed to symbolically confirm the contestants’ expectations.

Despite the contestants’ authentic self, the “spirit (*jingshen*, 精神)” of the contestants were also constantly pointed out by the mentors. Optimism was spoken highly of by the mentors. When talking about Wang Jinlin’s performance, mentor Liu Huan said: “We hope we can see the spirit in the work. That I’m happy. That I’m really happy. I like this.” As mentioned earlier, Wang Xiaotian was not selected during the blind audition, but mentor Liu Huan seemed to appreciate that he still smiled while facing the hard life and failure: “You have always been optimistic towards everything. This is so important to musicians... Nothing is more important than this... Keep this healthy mindset.” Also, as a Beijing-drifter who had been through hardship, Liu Jin received mentor Liu Huan’s compliment: “People who love music won’t treat this as a suffering. (She seems) always happy. Because of music, she lives her life happily... I really like this kind of spirit.” Mentor Yang also seemed to be inspired by her: “So many years have passed and it didn’t destroy your will. You are still so positive.”

Other than optimism and willpower, the mentors also gave credit to those who appeared to persevere in the face of hardship, such as contestants Dewen and Slippers, Chen Lei, etc. Hip-hop duo Dewen and Slippers was shown writing songs, sitting on a narrow bed. Mentor Liu praised: “You remain committed to making music even on a bed. I’m moved by your spirit.” Chen Lei failed to be selected by any mentor at first but succeeded in the reborn round. She said with determined voice: “I wanted to sing until somebody recognized me.” And she was met with loud and encouraging applause from the mentors.

6.3 Voice-over

61 contestants were accompanied by off-camera voice-over commentaries talking about them and their performances while they were stepping off the stage or being shown finished performances. (Contestant Wang Xiaotian receives 2 comments because he appears both in a normal episode and the “reborn” episode).

I consider the appearance of this repetitive, formalized, and patterned off-camera commentary as a media ritual which shown that the contestants crossed the boundary between the ordinary world and the *SOC* world, because the contestants were described as somehow being transformed and their situations as being improved. A typical comment consisted of the identity of a contestant, remarks about the quality of the performance, which mentor’s team a contestant joins, what it meant to be performing, and what effect the performances had on the audience. These comments were spoken by a certain bright mandarin-speaking male voice. It represented the voice of the program itself, which sounded like it is always confidently delivering good news, instead of an emotional-sounding commentator at a sporting event.

In this program, good music did not only concern the musical elements of the songs but also the contestants’ lives, personalities and the ways they presented the songs. All these elements were usually what the voice-over commented on. Next, I will examine the comments on 3 aspects and see how they transmitted preferred qualities of the contestants and their music.

Identity of the contestants

The commentary usually started with introducing the identity of a contestant. That included their age, profession and hometown. In terms of the age, the commentator seemed to welcome people of all ages and then emphasized their biological or psychological youth. He called the

contestants under 30 years old “girl” (*nūhai*, 女孩), “boy” (*nanhai*, 男孩) and “lad” (*xiaoge*, 小哥) such as “this 25 years old big boy from Hangzhou” and “this dream-chasing girl” who is 28, and called contestant Xie Di a “little fat kiddo” (*xiao pangwa*, 小胖娃) who was 24 years old. Young talents were very welcomed: “16 year-old Tu Yijia is born with extraordinary talent.” On the other hand, contestants who were over 40 years old, such as Lei Gang and Lao Qian, are described as being young because they have young minds: “Lei Gang’s rock spirit of being forever young”; “Lao Qian has a dream-chasing heart that never dies”. The focus on youth implied that an energetic, fresh image is preferred from the contestants.

When it came to the professions of the various contestants the voice-over announcer also gave people all kinds of titles such as student, teacher, white-collar, bus driver, backstage composer and so on. The contestants were constructed as being ordinary folks with dreams of being successful musicians with large followings. Ordinarity, which has “historically been defined in class terms”, is used as a “guarantor of authenticity” (Holmes 2004). The ordinary side of the contestant authenticated what they did on stage. Sometimes the voice hid some contestants’ identities to make them seem more ordinary than they might actually be. For example, contestants Huo Zun was the son of the famous Chinese singer Huo Feng, but he was simply called a “senior university boy” while Singaporean rising star Ling Kai was named as “this lonely girl”. The voice exploited musician Miao Xiaoqing’s shortcoming by just calling him “stuttering boy”.

In addition to coming from different professions, the contestants were also from different geographical places. Though the voice only mentioned the hometown of 18 of the contestants, it covered all the regions where Chinese people live. “Beijing”, “The prairie of Inner Mongolia”, “Xianyang”, “Uyghur”, “Qingdao” represented the north; “Chengdu”, “Hunan”, “Shanghai”, “Hangzhou”, “Nanchang”, “Guangzhou” represented the south. Also, “Singapore”, “Taiwan”, “Taipei” represented the overseas. The voice-over gave the impression that the contestants could be from anywhere and that they were equal no matter where they came from as long as they spoke Chinese.

Performance

As the opening introduction of the first episode of *SOC* claimed, the goal of the program was to “boost Chinese original music and discover Chinese original singer-songwriters”.

Apparently the voice-over comments did not let go of any chance to put an “original and creative (*yuanchuang*, 原创)” on everything in order to emphasize this principle of the program, for example, “*yuanchuang* music/work/song”, “mentors’ *yuanchuang* records”, “dream of being a *yuanchuang* musician”, “this stage for *yuanchuang* music”. *Yuanchuang* implied two dimensions of qualities a contestant was expected to be in possession of: the ability to write a song and possibly play an instrument, and the ability to create something new. Therefore, the voice preferred not to use words such as “write” or “song”, but “create (*chuangzao*, 创造)” or “creation (*chuangzuo*, 创作)”, for example: “[H]e creates a new energy in rock music”, “this soulful creation”. In addition, it used words such as “innovative (*chuangxin*, 创新)”, “refreshing angle”, “new energy”, “whimsy ideas”, “unconstrained imagination”, “A talent from outer space” to describe some of the contestants’ songs in order to frame the songs as fresh, free and brilliant art. Again, though we do not know if, for example, contestant Xiang Yahong’s rock song actually brought something new to rock music, the voice framed it as such in order to fit its scheme that Xiang was transformed to a creative rocker by being recognized by the mentors. By constantly giving repetitive comments, the program appeared to “stand in” as the legitimate place for discovering good Chinese music and as being the gatekeeper of good Chinese music.

In addition to focusing on the originality of the contestants, there were some other qualities the voice-over announcer chose in order to summarize the contestants’ performances. He praised the contestants’ self-expression and subjectivity highly. In this program, the subjectivity was partly presented by the desire for the independence from a family or a collective. The contestants, through showing what they were capable of, declared that they could be independent and successful at what they really wanted to do. Contestant Jiang Yaojia,

who was born in the 1990s, “speaks out loud her music dream to her parents”, and likewise with drummer Xin Ruotian, who was a percussionist playing with orchestras, finally got to sing “his own song”. Also, the comment “Xie Di actively pursues his life and dream” emphasized the good side, which was freedom and independence, of the contestant’s unwillingness to work in a company. Contestant Hui Zi was metaphorically described as “a gray bird that flies in the music sky and never perches”. What the program encouraged its contestants to do was that they should work for themselves and be nobody else’s blind follower or employee, or at least that they should be aware of being independent.

Except for the subjectivity, the voice-over announcer puts great effort into highlighting the attitude of the contestants such as their positivity, honesty, courage and perseverance. These qualities were not necessarily what the program should require from the musicians because it claimed to open for everyone as long as they were creative. Therefore, by connecting these words to the contestants’ lives and virtues instead of their music and art, *SOC* constructed a norm that an ordinary Chinese person, rather than just a musician or an entertainer, should comply with. Also, it appeared that the voice-over announcer had his own interpretation of these words.

In terms of positivity, the voice-over announcer gave comments such as “a happy and humorous song”, “pure and moving voice”, and “cute”. Rock music, which could have been a statement of critical and strong attitude, was especially covered by nice words to fit the positive scheme: “energetic rock of youth”, “honest rock”, “a good song with rock style”, “a dream-chasing rock youth”. The voice gave Hui Zi, the rocker I mentioned above, his best wishes: “If he goes on doing music, he will gain the most beautiful music...” Here, rock music was just described as “beautiful” which excluded other aspects of his music. Moreover, when someone failed to advance in the first round, the voice-over announcer also focused on the better side of the situation. For instance, he gave his best wishes to Wang Xiaotian when he failed in the first round: “We hope he can keep the optimistic attitude of writing songs for wild cats and the power of dream will support him to go on singing happily.” And to Wang Fei, who failed again in the rebirth episode, it assumed “(We) believe that when he (Wang Fei)

left the stage he feels no regrets anymore.” Without the support of the facts, these positive comments implied that good musicians were glad and felt hopeful about the future as long as they were given the chance to perform their music on this stage, no matter what the results were. The voice-over announcer hid the real emotions of the contestants in order to fit them seamlessly into the positive category it sets up, because the contestants were supposed to become happy after performing on national TV.

When it came to honesty, the voice-over announcer directly said “(someone) sings honestly”, “honest singing”, “honest rock”, “the most honest desire for music” and “honest emotion”. Though it said: “What *SOC* really evaluates here is the quality of the songs” when he commented on contestant Jin Hu’s performance, singing with honesty was apparently very important, too. However, the honesty in the voice was a vague concept because we may feel all kinds of voices are honest somehow. A voice can be honestly angry, honestly critical, honestly depressed, but on this stage honesty was limited to a nice, warm, hopeful expression.

Speaking of courage, the voice-over announcer praised either that some contestants “dare create something new in their music” or that they were very brave to step on this stage to perform. The former courage still matched the program’s focus on originality, and it was the courage to experiment with new musical forms more than the themes, for example, by “using Peking opera in jazz music” Hu Shasha was considered “daring and creative”. On the other hand, the latter courage, again, had little to do with music itself. It was the courage to step on a national channel’s stage as such: “(Contestant Wuladuoen) bravely brought her favorite song and came to this stage”; “(Tang Xiaokang) bravely stepped on this stage for original music”; “(She) came here with a fearless spirit”. This courage did not concern the contestants’ critical minds or nerves to speak out something others did not dare to say but it was rather a basic quality as a professional singer or performer. This bravery was what the program required from an ordinary person instead of a performer. Therefore, again, the contestants were constructed as ordinary and unprofessional, and stepping on the stage of *SOC* was what makes them extraordinary and professional.

The last quality of the contestants that was frequently commented on is how persevering they were. To begin with, they devoted their lives to making music. Wuladuoan had “dedicated (herself) to music for many years” and Tan Zhou had “pursued his dream to be a creative musician for 10 years”. Chen Hanwen had been “a Beijing drifter (*beipiao*, 北漂) for 8 years” and Xi Er “graduated as a medicine student, but has been writing songs for 12 years”. Some of the contestants were not young talents, but long time that had been spent on music gave the contestants credit as being authentic and passionate music lovers. Did they become great musicians because of all this hard work? As I noted above, the voice-over announcer does not call them great musicians, but rather refers to them as “boys” and “girls”. The exception were 2 contestants who were named “creative talent” and Moxi Zishi was titled “music poet”. Nonetheless, the voice-over announcer seemed to give us an answer on what the hard work should lead to. “Liu Jin used 10 years to grind 1 sword. Her perseverance finally made her shine on this stage tonight.” “As long as you insist on making original music, this stage will give your dream wings.” It basically meant you had to go through *SOC* to be a great musician, although in the first round you were not yet one. Once again, the voice tried to make the contestants appear like ordinary people who were fighting for their success, and good Chinese music eventually would come from these ordinary yet sincere people. In this case, perseverance was expected from an ordinary person if he or she wanted to achieve great goals in life.

The meaning of the performance

To the contestants, the meaning of performing on this stage was supposed to be that it changes their lives and makes them shine. The voice, at first, emphasized the importance of the stage of *SOC*, where the contestants’ dreams came true and they rose beyond whoever they used to be. The voice-over announcer usually used a firm tone when it pronounced phrases such as “on this stage” or “this night” where the word “this” was emphasized. It articulated the stage of *SOC* as a supreme place where musicians and their music finally became good enough, and good musicians should treat this stage as their highest goal.

Also, the voice-over announcer used an excited tone to announce that the performing experience made a big difference in the contestants' lives. For example he claims that "on *this* stage", contestants Wang Jinlin and Wuladuoen "realized the most splendid transformation" in their lives, and Tang Mohan's "beautiful dream came true". To Taiwanese street singer Qiu Zhenzhe, *SOC* was "the big stage in his dream". Drummer Xin Ruotian "finally sang his song on *this* big stage, and this must be the most exciting day in his 30 years", and former pop song composer, Malaysian Tang Xiaokang, "stepped on the stage for original music and found himself again". These statements or assumptions, again, had no fact to support themselves, but the voice of *SOC* at least had the authority to put a final note on what was presented on the stage. It, again, put the contestants in the category of "ordinary people" by focusing on their desire to succeed and their path on realizing their dreams and themselves.

Though I mentioned that the independence was encouraged from the contestants, an intimate, caring relationship with family and friends was also expected from them. When talking about the meaning of the performance, the voice-over announcer mentioned what it meant for the people who were close to the contestants. This way, the contestants were also constructed as ordinary people who had loyal family and a boy- or girlfriend. For instance, Huo Zun's performance "continued his mom's dream as a stage performer". Xie Hui "keeps his brother's dream in mind" and Jin Wenqi "keeps her boyfriend's dream in mind" while stepping on the stage. When giving his best wishes to Miao Xiaoqing, the voice-over announcer said: "Hope he sails far in the ocean of music with the love from his girlfriend." And to the rocker Hui Zi he said: "He will definitely gain the most beautiful music and love." Getting on the stage was not only for the fulfillment of their own dreams but also for a good future for who were close to them. It was a representation of the sense of responsibility and care.

4.4 Sounds of Originality

Sounds of Originality (*yuanchuang zhi sheng*, 原创之声) sessions were presented in the end

of episodes 4, 5 and 6. It was modeled on the form of a talk show where guests discussed different things in front of one or several of the hosts. Here the host of the program interviewed a few of the contestants and discussed different topics including personal stories, feelings about the competition, etc. The sessions involved large amounts of the contestants' personal disclosure, which is a key point for the talk show interview where "guests appear to be showing us their 'real' selves, where they can discuss how they 'feel' and reflect on their private lives with impunity" (Langer 1981). I consider Sounds of Originality session as a ritual because the disclosing people transformed from ordinary people to media people, and what the participants said transformed from something merely personal into something special and representative (Couldry 2003, p.122).

Next, I will examine the conversations between the host and the contestants that appeared in Sounds of Originality in order to see what kind of aspects of the contestants' stories were emphasized as something meaningful to the audience. In episode 4, the host brought up that contestant Wang Jinlin's song "Her Mom Doesn't Like Me" became popular among the audience:

Host: Your story has tremendously encouraged lots of young men who are chasing their loved ones.

Wang Jinlin: Don't give up. Don't abandon.

Host: (...) The worst difficulty to conquer in your life is that special disease you got when you were young.

Wang Jinlin: (...) This disease can't be completely healed but don't give up and don't lose hope.

While the host and Wang were talking, the screen in the back of the studio started to show some images in which some audience members held a piece of white paper in front of them, and on these papers they wrote about their own experience with their girlfriends' or boyfriends' mothers, which can be seen as imitating Wang Jinlin's attempt to speak out true feelings. These images shows that Wang Jinlin's personal story was connected to something wider and became representative of many people in front of the TV. Also, during the conversation above, close-up shots were given to Wang Jinlin, and he looked into the camera

like he was talking to the audience directly. By telling his own story and feelings to the camera, Wang Jinlin's words conveyed an idea to everybody that people should face the difficulties with a positive attitude and never give up.

Other stories of contestants such as Zhou San's also led to the praise of the spirit of not giving up. Zhou talked about his hardly rewarding bar singer experiences and how mentor Cai appreciated the simplicity in his music. The host summarized Zhou's story as following, looking at us from the screen:

It only takes 3 minutes from feeling the simplicity to feeling touched. The time it takes to make instant noodles. You can't imagine how much these musicians have suffered, how many cups of instant noodles they ate on the path of chasing the music dream. I'm proud of all the young musicians.

The host connected Zhou San's experience to "all the young musicians" and spoke highly of the virtue of perseverance by using the dramatic comparison between the length of a song and the time the musician spent on making it.

Perseverance should be shown not only in terms of career but also love relationship. Li Xia was asked about his story of his English girlfriend who he missed talking to after their first meeting. He had made a big effort to find and finally managed to meet again accidentally. He wrote and sang a song called "Little Peony" for her to win her heart. Li was asked to sing this song during the session in front of the audience. While he sings, the pictures of his girlfriend and him continually appeared on the screen. In the end, the host summarized his story: "In terms of love, people should be committed and persevering like this." Here Li Xia was supposed to represent an individual who tried hard to chase his personal happiness, love life, and hard work and perseverance should be necessary in this process.

In addition to the spirit of sticking to one's dream, the love and respect towards home and family was also underlined. In episode 5, Moxi Zishi talked about his longing for his hometown:

Moxi Zishi: Most of my inspiration comes from my hometown. (...) I've been outside, drifting and working. Gradually "home (*guxiang*, 故乡)" has become a vague word. Every time I close my eyes I see my hometown. My clansmen and my families are aging. And those forests, rivers, mountains and trees. (...) I can't stop thinking and dreaming about them.

Host: To everybody who is drifting outside, "hometown" is a profound word. When you can't find the goal in life, go back to your home to find yourself and what home means to life. Then reconstruct yourself and make yourself do better on your own path.

While Moxi was talking, pictures of his hometown, which was a land with primitively beautiful and almost untouched nature, and animals, farmers, women, kids were shown on the back screen of the studio. The special emphasis on Moxi's hometown, as other contestants' hometowns were not shown in such way during the show, reflected a preference of presenting "home" as countryside and village, a place where people lived off the soil. It was different from the city, where many rural youth such as Moxi left their villages for. To Moxi, home has become a kind of idealized spiritual support instead of a part of daily life. The host connected Moxi's longing for home to how people who left home should feel in general. According to him, home should be a place people could somehow "find themselves" again, which implied that a person was identified by his or her hometown and family. And home should be missed, respected and considered, quite practically, as a pure, holy place that was supposed to empower a person and help him or her dealing with challenges in real life.

At the end of episodes 4, 5 and 6's sounds of originality sessions we could see that the contestants of each episode said a line to the camera, something which seemed to express what music meant to them. And we also saw a line of white, big-font subtitle under the screen that summarized what each contestant says. Finally we saw a big-font white line fading in and fading out in the black background of the screen. Appearing during and after the confessions of the contestants, these subtitles come across as rather objective-sounding in tone, and seemed to transcend the personal feelings of the contestants and drew a conclusion in general

on how the music should be or mean:

Episode 4

Zhou San: Life makes me nervous while music makes me not nervous anymore.

Subtitle: Music makes me not nervous anymore.

Wang Jinlin: Music makes me calm. Singing and writing songs makes me feel more confident in life.

Subtitle: Music makes me more confident.

Tu Yijia: No matter when I'm at school in the day or in the dream at night, music brings me to fly.

Subtitle: Music brings me to fly.

White line in the end: Music is confidence.

Episode 5

Moxi Zishi: Music is a kind of spiritual nourishment. It makes me happy, sad, free and open-minded. It makes me excited.

Subtitle: Music can't be restrained.

Xie Di: I want free music. No need for working from nine o'clock to five o'clock. (*zhaojiuwanwu*, 朝九晚五).

Subtitle: Music doesn't need nine to five.

Jiang Yajia: Music means love and freedom. Life, music, be yourself.

Subtitle: Music means being yourself.

White line in the end: Music is freedom.

Episode 6

Chen Lei: No matter at the top floor of a department store or on a wonderful stage, I'll always sing.

Subtitle: Go on singing no matter where you are.

Lao Qian: I'd love to be crazy forever for music.

Subtitle: Be crazy forever for music.

Li Xia: Ten years ago I got on the train to Beijing because of music. Now this train is still in my heart, driving full-speed.

Subtitle: Music train is always on the road.

Wang Xiaotian: Everybody fails including me. But as long as you stick to it, you'll see the dawn next second.

Subtitle: Will see the dawn as long as you stick to it.

White line in the end: Music is a kind of commitment (*jianchi*, 坚持).

According to the summaries drawn by the subtitles, as music could make people feel confident, the people who made music should also feel confident, calm, and not afraid of being themselves; people should feel free because of music, which meant that they could freely express themselves, be themselves and do as they please; making music also stood for the virtue of being committed to something and never giving up.

Chapter 7: Semi-final

As a result of the blind audition, each mentor selected 16 songs as candidates for his or her album. Then each mentor picked up 8 candidates to enter the semi-final and the final album according to the mentor's preferences. The reason why these 32 songs were selected and the others were dismissed was hardly explained. The mentors called out the contestants who were selected and saw off the ones who were not, and that is all that was presented to the TV audience. This can be seen as a small ritual, too, one that further naturalized the unquestionable authority of the mentors.

The semi-final consisted of 4 episodes. In each episode, one of the mentors presented the modified songs and performances of his group members. For instance, in the 7th episode, mentor Liu Huan's group members, who contributed to his album *New Nine Beats* (*xin jiu pai*, 新九拍), performed their songs. In addition to the mentors, 51 "professional" judges who were editors or critics that worked for the music media would vote for the contestants. The two songs from each group with the highest votes would advance to the final and became the so-called "hit singles (*zhuda*, 主打)" of the respective album they eventually would appear on.

I found the semi-final to contain the following rituals: the mentors' introductions of the contestants, backstage cultivation and rehearsal, the presence of the parents, the mentors' comments on the performances, and the talk-show interview session stars of originality. These rituals were organized around categories such as "ordinariness" and "reality". They suggested that being selected into the mentors' group was better than fighting alone, and the contestants could become more of themselves when they adapted themselves to the professional judges' modification. Also managing to appear in the semi-final, as in the blind audition, was also supposed to be such a special thing through which the contestants could be considered successful and could symbolically returned their parents' favors. The norms I found in these rituals are that good musicians should be honest, down-to-earth, confident, hardworking,

adaptive to the authorities' expectation, good at contributing to the harmony and success of a group, and should still fulfill their filial duties. Through the modification of the songs and performance we can still see a strong preference on the combination of Chinese elements and foreign music styles.

7.1 Cultivation and rehearsal scenes

Before the contestants performed on the stage during the semi-final, there were scenes that showed what the mentors thought about their students and how they helped them modify their songs, and further how the contestants responded to the mentors and how the contestants practiced. In these scenes, the mentors expressed the intention of making changes and rearranging the songs, and they also gave suggestions on how the contestants should perform. We consistently saw that the contestants were shown singing in front of the mentors in a rehearsal room, where the mentors suddenly stopped the contestants and suggested how they thought the song should be instead. The contestants were shown listening carefully. After the mentors finished talking, the contestants often looked a little confused. In the end, they nodded and agreed with the mentors, and practiced hard on adapting to the changes. We could not see any direct evidence of discussion or disagreement between the mentors and the contestants. In short, the mentors were shown to have the right to change the songs. All they needed to do was to inform the contestants of the changes they wanted to be made, and the mentors saying that the new way is better. The contestants all acted like obedient students who accepted all the instructions from the mentors.

This ritual of cultivating and rehearsal implied a boundary between the contestants' original performances and the modified performances. The contestants were supposed to work hard in order to be able to perform according to the mentors' instructions, something that would supposedly make the performances and the songs better. Next, I will examine in detail how the mentors and contestants participated in the ritual in order to see what kinds of norms this ritual transmitted and how the contestants respond to them.

Modification of the songs and the performances

Mentor Liu Huan chose to add orchestra, a number of extra instruments, and/or sound effects to the songs in order to reach his criteria that the songs should be manlier, more striking, exotic and with a taste of classical music.

For instance, he thought Wang Jinlin's song "Her Mom Doesn't Like Me" should be "grander and more manly (*geng xiong Zhuang*, 更雄壮)" so he changed the style of song into funk, and added deep marching-band toms. He also asked Wang to let out (*xuanxie*, 宣泄) his feelings: "I want him to say it valiantly (*xiongjiujiu*, 雄赳赳) that 'Her mom doesn't like me. So what?'" It seemed Liu wanted Wang to present a more confident, fearless man instead of the originally self-deprecating boy. Rocker Li Xia was also asked to change his song: every "you" in the lyrics were changed into "me". This, according to Liu Huan, could make the song more personal because rock music should cause other people's empathy. And the title became "Midnight Express" instead of the original "Tonight's Train"; the sound effect of a train was added; the band included 5 guitarists and 2 bassists. All of these were supposed to make the song "more powerful, striking and direct", which was how a rock song should be according to mentor Liu.

When it came to emphasizing the exotic and classical elements in songs, he added western orchestra and Indian instruments to the songs of contestants Tu Yijia, Su Peiqing, Zhang Ling and Wula Duoan. He hoped that Chinese music could be more varied and therefore included a variety of styles in order to create beauty and goodness in Chinese people's culture and lives.

Mentor Zhou Huajian also expected confidence from the contestants. He commented on Qiu Zhenzhe's song: "It sounds like you're talking to yourself, mumbling. I suggest we make it more luxurious. Let's make the chorus sound like Broadway shows." The purpose was to "give him confidence to get a good control of a big band, a stage that's bigger than a

Broadway stage”. To “rocker” Xiang Yahong, Zhou hoped Xiang could act “more sharply”:
“Tell everyone that rock has something good to offer. Attitude is very important. Let it start
from your heart and then deliver it to the audience through your eyes and voice.”

Zhou also told contestant Lu Xianghui to perform without her guitar because: “The life of this
song doesn’t come out (with guitar). I have to make sure that the fish doesn’t only stay in the
bathtub. It has to swim into the sea. You should do the same.” It seems that the original selves
of the contestants were not good enough anymore. They should accept the challenges given
by the mentors in order to achieve better selves, to know how to cooperate with a team (a
group of other musicians) and not only stand for themselves.

In addition to confidence, Zhou also tried to highlight the Chinese elements in the contestants’
songs. His scheme was combining Chinese traditional culture with fashionable western style
music, which could contribute to the Chinese music culture. He suggested adding Chinese
ethnic percussion to Xin Ruotian’s song in order to emphasize the martial-art (*wuxia*, 武侠)
part of it. Likewise, he asked Hu Shasha to frequently alternate Peking opera singing style
with Bossa Nova singing style, which he felt would highlight the combination and difference
of these two music styles. According to Zhou: “This is a bold experiment. I hope through Hu
Shasha a unique style of music will be born in China.”

Furthermore, Zhou also wanted to present some contestants as ordinary people who did not
lose their characteristic of being ordinary on stage. In case of Qian, who brought a blues song
sung with Xi’an dialect, Zhou said: “Xi’an dialect gives blues a new life in the scale of
Chinese music. (...) We want it to be more primitive. (...) It is no good if he loses his
grass-roots sense.” And he talked about “rocker” Xiang Yahong: “He represents the general
public (*puluo dazhong*, 普罗大众). He knows what he should sing.”

Mentor Yang Kun connected the challenges he assigned to the contestants with the virtue of
being hardworking. Contestants Wang Xiaotian and Xi Er seemed to practice hard after their
songs were rearranged by Yang Kun. Thus, Yang said that they were both very hardworking,

making great effort, and Yang hoped he could see their growth and to see the contestants rewarded for their hard work through positive reactions to their performances on stage. The details of the changes made to the songs were not talked about in the video. We could only see the contestants listening to the mentor politely, and practicing seriously. It seemed the music was not of the greatest importance here. Instead, trying hard to complete the tasks that were given to them by the mentor was praised.

“In order to go on a bigger stage, we must take risks (*maoxian*, 冒險).” Here Yang referred to the modification of Moxi Zishi’s performance. He asked Moxi Zishi to cooperate with other musicians during his performance, which was rather difficult for Moxi, because he used to freely write and sing songs based on his own sense of rhythm (*suixing ziyou*, 隨性自由). Hence, the modification was not made based on the will of the contestant himself but the mentor’s need to create something surprising for the audience. Here, finishing the task given by the mentor was defined as an adventure that proves the fearless and hardworking quality of the contestant.

Mentor Cai Jianya seemed to believe ordinariness could touch people, too. She did not modify Zhou San’s song because “the simpler, the better”. Later she repeated the same opinion on the song: “Adding things to this song will make it worse. Your charm is your simplicity.” The simplicity here referred to the simple structure of the song and the direct lyrics of dreaming about having a girlfriend. In the case of Zhao Zhao, though the song might be rearranged, Cai still said: “I believe he’ll conquer the tensions and sing out the initial warmth and emotion.” No matter whether she modified a song or not, she made a point that the honest, simple spirit was left intact in the songs. After being through training, the contestants were still supposed to remain the original ordinary selves somehow. In a sense, this was a kind of modification, too, because the contestants had to *work on* retaining their qualities according to her guidance.

To sum up, the mentors ritually gave undeniable suggestions to their students and therefore established their absolute power over how the performances should be and would be. Each mentor had their own ideas on how the contestants should act. At first, the contestants should

be more confident. This mainly involved learning to cooperate with others and changing their self-entertaining performance into a willingness to communicate with the audience and a declaration of position and importance. Secondly, the combination of traditional Chinese cultural elements and western music style, and the usage of exotic musical style were also preferred. The musicians' goal of making music should be to create beauty and goodness and contribute to the Chinese music world. Thirdly, challenging and adapting oneself to the mentors' suggestions and working hard on accomplishing the tasks was praised as a good quality. At last, ordinariness is a quality that should somehow remain in the music. Some of the contestants were carefully constructed as people who remained themselves, unpolished in their heart no matter how successful they became, and what they sang could still represent the feeling of Chinese people in general.

The contestants' responses to the modifications

As I mentioned above, facing the challenges and the tasks the mentors gave to them, the contestants seemed to act like obedient students, which meant most of them seemed to comply with the norms that the mentors imply. The contestants complained that the changes the mentors made to the songs were difficult to adapt to, but they were willing to practice in order to succeed in the semi-final. Some seemed to regard adapting and practicing as being hardworking, too. For instance, "rocker" Li Xia said: "After mentor Liu Huan changed the lyrics, I feel it's difficult to adapt, but I'm actively putting effort into the practice." And if the new version of the song could be recognized by more people, he felt his "effort is not in vain." Contestant Tu Yijia said she did not even know where to put her hands because the orchestration was packed, but she said: "Through my hard work, I want to make the monument of my 16 years into a golden trophy." Qiu Zhenzhe expressed fear when he heard that he had to cooperate with other musicians, but in order to bring this song, a song he had put great effort into it, to the semi-final, he would "sing as hard as he could. (*ping le ming qu chang*, 拼了命去唱)." These contestants treated obeying what the mentors requires as working hard which was a necessary process to reach success, and it seemed to matter more

than the questions or uneasiness they held against the mentors' arrangements.

Some contestants apparently expressed that they practiced and performed hard in order to show that they fulfilled the mentors' expectations. For example, Hu Shasha said alternating Peking opera singing style with Bossa Nova singing style stroke her as very difficult to do, but she still would sing it "most beautifully" (*zui deijin*, 最得劲) because she had "a good teacher, Zhou Huajian, who support her". Wang Siyuan said that cooperating with an orchestra was something he had never done before, but he would "do what is best" (*zuo de zuihao*, 做得最好). The girl who was asked to give up playing her guitar, Lu Xianghui, kept saying that she was nervous but she told herself to perform well (*haohao biao xian*, 好好表现). "Most beautifully", "do what is best" and "perform well" indicate some kind of standard, of which the contestants were not aware before they first performed in the program's blind audition. These words show that they were not only aware of the standard set by the mentors, but also that they thought these standards stood for what was the best they could do in regards to their song and performance. Contestant Wang Siyuan pointed out why he wanted to do what was best: "in order to win in the semi-final." Therefore, as working hard, trying to fulfill the mentors' expectations was also regarded as a necessary route to success in the next round.

Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, during the training process, the mentors tried to tell the contestants that they should be themselves or that they should be confident and rule the stage after the performances were modified. Though this "being themselves" was the result of adapting to the mentors' instructions, some of the contestants conveyed that through the modification and practice, they could still be themselves or confident. As Michele M. Strano wrote: "[T]he symbolic performances of ritual cause participants to view the control of social groups and institutions as natural individual choices." (Strano 2006)

For instance, a violin quartet was added to Zhao Lei's performance and he was asked to sing better: "The requirement on singing technique is higher now." Despite that, he still said: "Tonight I will definitely sing out the purest painting in my heart." "Rocker" Xiang Yahong, as I mentioned earlier, was asked to perform "more sharply" and more confidently. He was

also uneasy with the changes: “I feel it’s difficult to adapt. So privately, my buddies are helping me practice and making it feel right (*zhao ganjue*, 找感觉).” But he still expressed that he had control of his work if he could reach the requirement: “Tonight I’ll let all of the Chinese people hear the rock that belongs to me.”

7.2 Teaming up and naming the students

In this section I will analyze the rituals of how the mentors introduced and named the contestants of their groups. These rituals transmitted the norms of good musicians/people as being contributors to a group that was led by an authority. The contestants should comply themselves with the norms of the groups in order to make the concepts of the groups work. The specific norms of each group will be discussed below.

Mentor Yang Kun’s concept for his album was settled as “heartfelt”(zou xin, 走心). In his words, the songs he selected for the album were “eight bullets aiming for your hearts”. He also explained the concept more clearly: “Art creation originates from life. The students put their life experiences into their creation. No matter how time changes, we ought to make heartfelt music.” In the very beginning of the 9th episode during the semi-final, we can see him give each contestant the same necklace (see Fig7) that he himself would be wearing during the second round of the competition, and all the contestants happily put the necklaces around their neck. Except for the talisman function of the necklace, Yang Kun explained the meaning of it as “being heartfelt within the circles (*zai quan'er li zouxin*, 在圈儿里走心).” We can see this necklace be kissed and touched by contestants intermittently throughout the program, too.

Later, during the stars of originality, which is a talk-show interview session between the mentors and their students, Yang revealed that the outer circle of the necklace was carved with Chinese characters of “*The Song of China*” while the inner heart-shaped circle is carved with his own name. Therefore, the necklace was used as a visible symbol of the program and

mentor Yang Kun's presence.



Figure 9. The necklace of “heartfelt”.

In addition, Yang Kun unified all the contestants under the concept of “heart”. (see Table 1). Yang gave name to each contestant according to his feelings or his interpretation of the songs. According to the chart below, Yang presented his team members as people who were young and energetic, romantic, sympathetic, dedicated, grateful, persevering. Even though contestant Hui Zi was called “heart of wildness”, Yang Kun explained that Hui Zi, in daily life, was a very sweet, romantic (*chongman rouqing*, 充满柔情) and dedicated (*xizhi ruwei*, 细致入味) person. Therefore “being heartfelt within the circles” could probably be interpreted as that the contestants could be themselves and perform whatever they wanted to, as long as they were presented within the borderlines that were drawn by the mentor. By accepting the necklaces, the contestants were transformed from individuals to a part of the team that was led, or dominated, by Yang Kun.

Table 1. Nicknames of the students/contestants in mentor Yang Kun’s group.

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Suby | Ma Shangyou | Moxi Zishi | Wang Xiaotian | Liu Zhongyan | Hui Zi | Lü Weiqing | Xi Er |
| Heart of youth | Heart of absolute love | Heart of stirring love | Heart of sympathy | Heart of dedication | Heart of wildness | Heart of appreciation | Heart of perseverance |

Mentor Yang Kun apparently seemed to appreciate that the contestants expressed what they really felt about life in music, and by accepting the necklace, the contestants showed their agreement with him. Moreover, by giving the necklace to them, Yang was telling the contestants they should go on *working* on being real and heartfelt. The ritual of giving and accepting the necklaces and the nicknames transmitted the norms that the contestants should be sincere, heartfelt, loving and caring, sympathetic and dedicated. Again, these qualities had little to do directly with their music, but rather related to what kind of virtue or morality they should have as people.

Each episode of the semi-final presented the performances of 8 contestants from one mentor’s team, and the goal was to select 2 songs from each episode to enter the final competition. Representatives from the music media became judges who voted for each contestant, and the mentors’ role was transformed from judge to team leader. Before each contestant performed, the mentors were responsible for stepping on the stage, introducing their concepts of their albums, telling the audience how the contestants and their songs were modified, and how they fit into the albums’ respective concepts.

Episode 7 was a presentation of mentor Liu Huan’s team. He said he hoped that tonight his students could “happily sing the songs from their hearts to the best”. In addition, he said the purpose of the album was “variety” (*duoyangxing*, 多样性) which meant each song was modified to highlight styles such as blues, rock, folk, etc.. Unlike other mentors, Liu did not give nicknames to his team members. But the requirement on “variety” and his conscious

categorization reflected that he hoped the songs would work as a group of songs, and not bore the audience rather than simply respecting each contest's original intention of their songs. The contestants applied their songs to particular styles and arranged them based on their own choice in the first place, but mentor Liu changed the styles of some songs or added extra elements in order to reach particular effects and his expectations. By openly speaking about the modifications during the introduction, he naturalized the boundary between original songs and songs that were modified by the mentors, and stating that the latter was better. Also, in general, these modified songs were supposed to express happiness, positive strength, freshness.

For example, he introduced Wang Jinlin's song: "The song used to be raggae and boogie style. After the modification, it became funk. I hope this first song can give everyone a fresh and happy impression." He talked about Zhao Lei's song in a similar manner: "I added 4 violins to it so that the song has an artsy quality." He also called the rock song he modified "authentic rock" and hoped the song would "shock your (the audience's) heart". When he introduced the last song by Wula Duoan, he addresses his purpose of making his album with varied styles: "The purpose of our effort is to present music that is more varied and interesting. We hope that the listener can open their eyes, and accept more fresh stuff." Again, this was *his* goal, not the contestants'. No matter how well-meant his intentions were, he did change the original intentions of the contestants.

Both mentors Cai Jianya and Zhou Huajian gave nicknames to the contestants in their teams, too. Cai called her album "Tasty Life" (*meiwei rensheng*, 美味人生) which aimed to collect songs featuring Chinese culture mixed with western "tastes". She named every contestant in her group with a kind of dish, which according to her, symbolized a certain characteristic (see Table 2). The way she introduced the contestants was by carrying her guitar and singing a small part of the contestants' songs, and introducing their nicknames. For example, she called Zhou San her "white rice" (*bai mifan*, 白米饭), which was "the food for ethnic Chinese people's soul. (...) So simple but it is our identity", and Zhao Zhao her "soy milk and deep-fried dough stick" (*doujiang youtiao*, 豆浆油条) which her mom used to make for her

and “it feels like home.” These two songs sounded slow, simple, honest with male vocals like emotional monologues. She chose to connect being simple and honest specifically with Chinese people’s identity, which fit the “Chinese culture” part she wanted for her album. And she named energetic, explosive rock songs and their writers as western “dessert” (“It’s just like the dessert I make.”), “whiskey”, “fried chicken and beer” and “popcorn”, which fit the “western taste” she planned to add to her album. “Chocolate chicken stew”, Liu Xiangsong represented a successful experiment of combining Chinese elements and western style. Video showed him trying to cook chicken with chocolate according to the mentors’ suggestion, and it turned out delicious. Cai appeared to be very satisfied with this action.

Table 2. Nicknames for the contestants in mentor Cai Jianya’s group.

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|------------------------|---------------|------------------|------------|
| Liu Xiangsong | Xie Di | Zhao Zhao | Zhou San | Ling Kai | Song Yuanyuan | Manmanshuo Group | Liu Bokuan |
| Chocolate chicken stew | Spicy French fries | Soy milk and deep-fried dough stick | White rice | Fried chicken and beer | Popcorn | Dessert | Whisky |

Mentor Cai Jianya gave out names according to her personal feelings and purpose, and the contestants and the audience were supposed to accept these interpretations. And from all appearances it seems the contestants did, in fact, accept them. Her introductions transmitted the norms of good music as either being really Chinese (simple, honest) or having stereotypical western qualities such as being happy, fresh, sweet, and energetic.

Mentor Zhou Huajian’s approach was similar to that of Cai. His concept was solely based on Chinese martial arts culture: “New Energy of Jianghu” (*jianghu xin nengliang*, 江湖新能量). *Jianghu* has different meanings in Chinese culture, but here it referred to the world that knight-errants (*xiake*, 侠客) inhabited in Chinese martial arts novels. According to the concept of a number of these novels, the knight-errants had a leader of the martial arts world

(*wulin mengzhu*, 武林盟主) who was supposed to be the greatest at *kungfu* and who dealt with politics in this world, and Zhou Huajian was given this title in *SOC*. Every contestant was given a name of an imaginary knight-errant (see Table 3). These names were dramatic and relatable to people who were familiar with martial arts novels.

Table 3. Nicknames of the students/contestants in mentor Zhou Huajian’s group.

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|----------------------|-------------|---------------------|
| Jiang Yaojia | Xin Ruotian | Hu Shasha | Wang Siyuan | Qiu Zhenzhe | Xiang Yahong | Lu Xianghui | Qian |
| Shooting star hammer | Knight of flying knife | Queen of hidden weapons | Nunchuks | Master of mental strength | Knight of long spear | Qing Gong | Drunken fist master |

Furthermore, the martial arts novels, *jianghu*, are complicated, dangerous, and the knight-errants are relatively free, sometimes rebellious individuals; Knight-errants from different factions (*menpai*, 门派) often fight with each other, too. On the contrary, Zhou explained *jianghu* as such: “In Chinese language, *jianghu* is a very profound word. A family, a market or a bus contains a *jianghu*. And the *jianghu* we present in the program is full of happiness, music and positive energy.” According to his concept, *jianghu* could be any place as long as there were people, namely society. And the contestants became knight-errants that contribute to the happiness and positivity that mentor Zhou wants to create in this group/society.

Similar to Cai, Zhou established a group identity for his team. In this group of *jianghu*, knight-errants were supposed to contribute their new energy to the group; world of *jianghu* or society, thanks to them, can be a happy and positive place. By naming the contestants and interpreting the names, as a leader, Zhou gained the right of twisting an established concept and interpreting it the way he wanted to. Yet the contestants were supposed to follow the new rules and to act his or her role according to the instructions.

7.3 The presence of the parents

I mentioned the presence of the contestants' parents during the blind audition. Those parents supported their children's music interest and career, but not every contestant had this kind of parents. Being musicians could mean drifting away from their parents and failing to meet their parents' expectations. Such was the case with contestants Qiu Zhenzhe, Zhao Zhao, Wang Xiaotian, Jiang Yaojia, Zhou San, Lu Xianghui, Xi Er and Ling Kai. As Jiang and Lu's parents were not ritually presented in the show, I will focus on the other contestants in order to analyze how the contestants were shown to comply with norms of good Chinese people through rituals.

Take Zhao Zhao as an example. In the scenes before he stepped on the stage during the blind audition, we saw him portrayed as a typical "Beijing drifter (*beipiao*, 北漂)" who carried a guitar case on his back, walking alone. He narrated that he came to Beijing when he was in his 20s, and that he had very few chances of visiting his mother at home. Therefore, in daily life, Zhao did not seem to comply with the norm of a good, caring son. Instead, he insisted on being a Beijing drifter who, instead of taking care of his parents or following his parents' will, left his home and family to chase individual dreams and self-fulfillment. However, he expressed his guilt in the conversation with the mentors during the blind audition: "We (I and my mom) only meet 2 or 3 times per year and I've been drifting in Beijing. I owe my family a lot." And in a short interview before the semi-final he reiterated: "My dad passed away early so I was brought up by my mother. But later I left home and have been making music for 14 or 15 years. I feel guilty." His confession displayed that being a Beijing drifter did not mean to challenge the norm of being a filial son.

Therefore, by ritually bringing his mom to the studio while he performed "the song for my mom" which he regarded as "a special gift for her" during the semi-final of the competition, the norm of a good son who returned the favor to his mother was represented through the action of the union of a son and a mother. The mentors asked where his mother was in the audience, and then she was given a microphone to express her feelings: "I was so excited to

hear him sing. Since he started to make music, I've never heard him singing. I couldn't help crying." Here, the mother appeared to accept her son's gift. Mentor Cai Jianya commented: "Family affection (*qinqing*, 亲情) runs so deep. It is very important for us musicians to gain support, understanding and sympathy (*tiliang*, 体谅) from our parents." A good musician, or a good person, therefore, was expected to gain approval, at least understanding from their parents for what he or she did. By taking part of the performative ritual of playing for his mother, Zhao negotiated his behavior and appeared to comply with the norm symbolically. His behavior might go on embracing the actions of being a Beijing drifter, but through the ritual above, the norm of being a good son was perpetuated.

Contestant Zhou San, during the semi-final, brought his wife to the studio instead of his parents. She was shown crying when she heard Zhou San sing and talk. Also, when Zhou San was performing, the photos of them and their newborn baby were shown on the screen. These scenes represented a norm of how an individual should fulfill his dream of getting married, having a child and forming his own family. However, his confession during the blind audition gave us another perspective on this norm. He mentioned that he resigned from the job as a highway toll-collector when he was 27 and became a bar singer. His mother was against his decision because they thought he should get married and have a baby for the sake of his mother. He also mentioned that when he had a regular-paying job, many people found his mother in order to introduce girlfriends to her son, but after leaving his steady-income position this came to an abrupt end. However, he wanted to have a girlfriend and to get married. We can see that he did not obey his mother by not having a steady job. But to his mother, a steady job, in the end, meant a good chance of getting married and having a child, something that overlapped with Zhou San's wish. Therefore, having his own happy family did not challenge his parents' value: a man of his age ought to form a family. So through the ritual of presenting his wife and offspring, the conflict between the decision of him leaving home and his mother's wish was negotiated. He indirectly appeared to comply with the norm of being a good son even though he did not have the child for his parents' sake.

Contestant Xi Er's parents were shown crying when he reached a high note while singing.

According to Xi Er, his parents compromised and supported his dream. The lyrics of his R&B/soul style song, “Endless Journey”, reflected his life story: “My mom told me to study hard when I was a boy. She said that way I can succeed. After 16 years of hard study, I finally walked on the real path of my life.” After the performance, the parents were presented in front of the camera, and Xi Er was shown thanking them. Xi Er told a story of him distancing himself from his parents by running away because they did not support his music career. However, he said and cried on the stage: “Now I’m 30 years old. It’s time that I fulfilled my filial-piety duty (*jin xiaodao*, 尽孝道). Actually, my parents compromised, paid a lot for me and bear this heavy dream together with me. I feel I owe (*kuiqian*, 亏欠) them so much. I especially want to thank my parents here.” Xi Er, who did not follow the norm of being an obedient and contributing son, shows his agreement with the norm of being a son that was in debt to his parents and who would pay back their favors symbolically through the ritual of having his parents sharing this important moment of his music career. We do not know in what way he would fulfill his filial duty, but the ritual perpetuated the norm that a child should fulfill his filial-piety duty.

Singaporean contestant Ling Kai’s case was unique in a way that not only she appeared completely alone in the blind audition, but also there were no conversations between the mentors and her about her friends or family. All we know about her from her first appearance is that she was from Singapore. However, as if to make up for prior absence, during the semi-final, her parents were presented in the studio. At first, she was presented by the mentors as a dream-chaser:

Zhou Huaijian (M): A Beijing drifter from Singapore. What an eye-opener.

Cai Jianya (M): A Singaporean Beijing-drifter girl. I invented it.

And then the mentors welcomed her parents who rose up from the audience, smiling and waving to the camera. Next, we heard Ling Kai state that she felt selfish for loving music instead of maths, finance and banking, which had made her parents worry about her. She said to her parents who were crying: “I hope you treat music as gift that I repay (*baoda*, 报答) you

instead of as a burden.” When mentor Cai said to them: “Your daughter is a very creative musician. You should feel proud of her”, they raised up their thumb and happily waved the boards with Ling Kai’s name and picture on. Again, by ritually showing that the daughter repays her parents and gains approval from them, and the parents were satisfied with their daughter, an ideal parent-child relationship was represented.

7.4 Commenting on the performances

Better self

I consider the contestants’ and the mentors’ comments on the performance in the semi-final as a media ritual. As a makeover session that is often seen in other talent shows, the semi-final was supposed to show that the contestants improved their ability and even transformed themselves. We can hear mentors keep emphasizing how different and good the contestants became. For example, mentor Cai said to Lu Xianghui: “You are a completely different person today.” And mentor Yang said to Liu Bokuan: “I couldn’t imagine that you are a bus driver when I saw you on stage.” The boundary between ordinary and extraordinary was crossed. Furthermore, the act of performance carries some meanings that was not entirely constructed by the performer, which is “the fundamental aspect of ritual” (Couldry 2003, p.124):

Lu Xianghui (C): Except for freedom, the fish (I) should be more brave and determined. When other people see you, they’ll do the same. Then the meaning is reached, and I’m not singing in vain.

According to Lu, “the meaning” was that the audience might be moved by her braveness and determination and can try to learn from her by watching TV. And this meaning was not encoded by her.

Through the comments from the contestants and the mentors, I hope to find what kind of norms were transmitted and in what way. Here are a few examples showing how the mentors insisted on the degree of freedom the contestants felt and how real they had become as they appeared to comply with the norms set by the mentors:

Wu (C): The first time (blind audition) I felt nervous, like I'm flying alone and lonely. This time (...) I'm singing about fighting (*pingbo*, 拼搏) and freedom.

Cai (M): You are very special. You can go on with your style.

Liu (M): You've done it (*zudao*, 做到) very well. During the previous flying time, you nearly fell down. Today you flew well, freely gliding, unrestrained.

Yang (M): During the first time, you sounded lonely and painful. But with this big band and new lyrics, I feel he is enjoying loneliness romantically.

Cai (M): ... You've been playing music alone. Are you used to this luxurious stage?

Qiu (C): I was so afraid... But everything felt right when the music started.

Lu (C): I've been thinking that I'm growing up in the program. In addition to freedom, a fish needs to be braver and determined.

Zhou (M): Today the song sounds richer.

Cai (M): I feel the ending sounds hopeful.

Wang (C): I want to express optimism, a Miss. Miao (This refers to the cat he wrote the song for) that stands for life and freedom.

Yang (M): ... (We) added something warm and positive. I feel it's a better interpretation than before.

Wang (C): ... This stage made me grow up a lot.

We can see that the mentors emphasized on how free, relaxed and full of hope the contestants had become, something the mentors claimed to be able to see on the contestants' faces and hear from their music. The words the contestants used to describe what they wanted to express or how they felt such as "fighting", "freedom", "brave", "determined", "optimism"

displayed that they not only complied with the norms set by the mentors during the cultivating sessions, but also regarded these things as what they themselves wanted to express, even though the mentors kept saying things that reminded us that these qualities were constructed and added to the contestants' performances. In the end, the original themes and meanings of the songs and the personalities in the songs were dissolved and transformed into the representation of optimism, determination and of being autonomous. Again, the norms of the good performances were about the virtues of good Chinese people instead of songs themselves.

Glad to be in a group

The atmosphere was less competitive during the semi-final than during the blind audition or during other western talent shows that usually only grant one winner with a big prize. This can likely be explained by it being guaranteed in *SOC* that every contestant who entered the semi-final would have their songs released as part of the mentors' albums. Mentor Zhou described the semi-final as album release presentation instead of being a competition. Under this atmosphere, after all the contestants of one group finished performing, they stood on the stage closely in a row, waiting together for the result of who would get the decisive support from their mentor and enter the final. Each of them was then offered a chance to say something to the mentors to express their feelings. I consider this as a ritual because this was supposed to be a special moment where the contestants appeared to be members of a group and crossed the boundary between lonely ordinary individuals into that of being contributors to a mentor's group in *SOC*.

Through these comments, we can witness that there was a strong idea of being a part of a group among the contestants. The norms that were transmitted through their ritual expressions of appreciation of being in a group were that good musicians/people should be loyal to the collective that ties everybody together like a warm family, to be proud of being a part of a successful concept that was enacted by the authority.

For example, in mentor Zhou Huanjian's group the contestants rank themselves as "the eldest (*laoda*, 老大)", "the second eldest (*laoer*, 老二)" and so on like family members or knight-errants who have a shared master in martial arts novels. And they called the mentor "Huajian papa (*huajian baba*, 华建爸爸)". Their comments transmitted the norms that the success should belong to their group thanks to the great leader mentor Zhou, and they should no longer be lonely anymore because they were a part of this group.

Xin Ruotian: I'm the second eldest. (...) No matter who will be selected, these are my *jianghu* brothers. We are one. We made a real *jianghu* style album.

Qiu Zhenzhe: I'm the fourth. The biggest gain was getting to know everybody. (...) I'm not alone. (...) I want to especially thank Huajian papa...

Jiang Yaojia: I'm the youngest. (...) Huajian papa showed us *jianghu* sons and daughters (*jianghu ern u*, 江湖儿女) what is a real star. (...) We are a whole (*tuanjie*, 团结).

Hu Shasha: Thank you for giving (*cigei*, 赐给) me so many brothers and sisters and making me no longer lonely.

Lu Xianghui: We achieved (the goal of presenting) *jianghu*. We won.

Mentor Cai Jianya's students tended to use the food nicknames to call themselves, categorizing themselves as belonging to the group of "Tasty life". Their comments transmitted the norms that like the food mentor Cai could make, their music should be heart-warming, and they should thank the mentor for making everything work out successfully.

Liu Xiangsong: We (the contestants of the group) have discussed and agreed that we are a bowl of heart-warming porridge (*nuanxin zhou*, 暖心粥) made by mentor Cai Jianya. I'm Sunday (*zhouri*, 周日). (粥 (porridge) and 周 (week) share the same pronunciation in Chinese.)

Xie Di: As (I sang about) I don't go to work tomorrow, I'm Friday (*zhouwu*, 周五).

Manmanshuo Group: We are Tuesday (*zhouer*, 周二) because both of us are pretty stupid (er, 二. It means stupid in some Chinese dialects.). Chef Cai, We'd love to be the meals on your plates (*panzhongcai*, 盘中菜).

Liu Bokuan: I'm *zhouba* (周八, because his song was titled $8 + 8 = 8$). I don't know how to thank you except for performing well according to your requirement.

Some contestants from mentor Liu Huan and Yang Kun's team also expressed their feelings for their groups. A musician's identity should not be separated from his or her group, and being in a group led by the mentors should be an unforgettable life experience for them.

Wang Jinlin: No matter who is selected, we are an inseparable album, New Nine Beats.

Hui Zi: I'll go on being heartfelt. Thanks for the gift (He referred to the necklace that mentor Yang had given to everybody.). I'll bring it with me all my life.

7.5 Stars of Originality

Setting

In the end of each episode of the semi-final, the contestants who performed in the episode would be invited to join a talk with the mentor. The session was called stars of originality (*yuanchuang zhixing*, 原创之星). From the sounds of originality (Sounds of Originality, the talk session during the blind audition) to the stars, the title itself implied a transformation of the contestants. In this talk show interview session, the contestants were given the right to ask the mentor questions, no matter what it was about. Two examples of how the host starts the session:

In order to celebrate (members of) *Walking Into the Heart Age* finishing the task successfully, you 8 contributors (*gongchen*, 功臣) have a special right to talk about whatever you want to.

From the blind audition to today, each ingredient has become an international dish. (...) In order to reward (*kaolao*, 犒劳) everybody, you are given a special chance to ask the questions you haven't asked before.

It looks like the contestants, who were to be asked to disclose their own stories in Sounds of Originality, now could take the initiative. But as the session was described as a “special right” and as a reward, it implied that the contestants crossed the boundary between the ordinary world into the world inside the media by getting to talk closely with celebrity mentors, thereby reinforcing the unequal status between the mentors and the contestants.



Figure 10. The studio was displayed as a classroom.

Each episode of stars of originality had different stage layouts that were based on the concepts that relate to the respective albums. The contestants were sitting closely together while the mentor was standing or sitting away from them. For instance, for mentor Liu Huan and his team, the small stage was displayed as a classroom (see Fig 8.), with student desks, teacher’s platform and blackboard, on which “New Nine class starts” was written. The host was playing as the teacher’s assistant and he shook a bell to announce that the class had begun. The students were supposed to raise their hands in order to get a chance to ask questions.

Other mentors and their team members were separated in a similar way. It is possible that the contestants and the mentors had communicated in a more intimate way offstage, considering the fact that the mentors had been cultivating and working with the contestants, but the

display on television represented a distant relationship. The contestants still had to go on playing the role of students while the mentors served the role of teachers. They could not all sit down together as artists and chat freely and equally even if the questions did not relate to teaching. Therefore, the norms that were transmitted here were that the contestants should also be eager to learn from the mentors/authority and respect them.

Self-disclosure of the mentors and the students

The stars of originality sessions, similar to the earlier-discussed Sound of Originality sessions, had the form of a talk-show. I noticed that quite a few of the questions from the contestants concerned the mentor's feelings about different things such as making music, facing difficulty in life, etc. And the mentor was supposed to share their ideas. Also, the talks sometimes led to concerning the contestants' lives and experiences, too.

For example, when contestant Su Peiqing asked mentor Liu Huan about who influenced him musically the most, Liu talked about his coincidental experience of picking up the piano and the guitar when he studied in university, and how he listened to music that he recorded from other people's tapes. As soon as he finished talking, the host said: "Every unexpected choice will become an important turning point in life." Here, the self-disclosure transformed the personal story of mentor Liu to something that was supposed to be pervasive and common to people in general. And the meanings this self-disclosure carried was supposed to represent how things ought to be in the society.

Next, I will analyze some of the conversations that occurred between the contestants, the host and the mentors in order to see what kind of content was underlined as something that was deemed to be special, transcendent and representative, and how norms were communicated through the content in this ritual.

Wang Siyuan (C): When you were in your 20s, you became a music producer. Have you regretted it?

Zhou Huajian (M): I was the assistant of a producer. My job was buying lunches, counting money, going to people's homes to urge them to hand in the lyrics, calling to urge them, which is the most painful. (...) Our line of work doesn't have a school. Instead, learning everything personally can make you gain a lot.

Host: No matter what kind of path you choose, don't worry about the outcomes at the moment. One day when you look back, you will find that you have gained more than you imagined.

Qiu Zhenzhe (C): Have you encountered any frustrating problems where you felt you couldn't take it anymore, but finally solved it?

Zhou Huajian (M): I had a lowest period. My songs were considered old-fashioned. (...) Record companies suddenly disappeared. (...) In this *jianghu*, personality is really important. You need to calm down. In terms of lots of things, you need to take it easy and slow.

In these conversations, the private early experience of mentor Zhou's music career was brought up in front of the public and it was supposed to mean something to everybody. According to the mentor and the host, people should work hard, keep learning and always have a positive mood towards the difficulties they encounter in their jobs.

During the chat within mentor Yang Kun's group, when contestant Ma Shangyou talked about his experience of playing a supporting role in a movie, the following conversation occurred:

Ma Shangyou (C): Playing such a role in the movie doesn't really involve feeling something strongly happening in your heart (*zouxin*, 走心).

Yang Kun (M): To sum it up, in movies, one is always playing someone else; in music, one is always singing (about) oneself.

When the session was about to end, the host summarizes:

The age we are living in now is an age of searching for oneself. In this age, how do we find the real call from our heart? How do we find something our heart really wants to hear? We need to walk into

an age of heart. (*Walk into an Age of Heart* is also the album title of mentor Yang Kun.)

Instead of suggesting to people how to act in a world full of changes and challenges, such as mentor Zhou Huajian's concept of *jianghu*, mentor Yang Kun and the host favored the idea that we need to find ourselves and to be authentic in this age. According to mentor Yang, making music on one's own was supposed to be an expression of one's true self. The host implied an idea that in today's China, people should look for their individuality, their true selves. It was the age that required people to put their real selves into work and life. As far as I understand it, the latter part of his comment was telling us that the songs in the album were heartfelt and authentic, and that people should live their lives the way the musicians made these songs.

At last, I will look at the conversations that occur within mentor Cai Jianya's group:

Zhou San (C): Mentor Cai called me "rice". (...) I like it.

Cai Jianya (M): You are genuine (*yuanzhi yuanwei*, 原汁原味). A very important spirit. We often lose direction and forget who we are in this complex society. You are the white rice that reminds people of their selves.

Here, similar to mentor Yang's message, mentor Cai also expressed the idea that people should be true to themselves in the complex society by praising Zhou San for managing to be himself and present the real self through music.

Zhao Zhao (C): My mom was sitting there listening to me. I was more nervous than during the blind audition.

Cai Jianya (M): ... I think your song will become a classic. It represents us ethnic Chinese and everyone in the world, paying our respect to our family. Very important.

Zhao Zhao (C): Have you written songs for your family?

Cai Jianya (M): I fought with my mom. (...) I wrote a song. (...) It's really personal and I didn't want my mom to know it.

Host: Today, through TV, let your mom know you wrote a song for her. Can you hum a little?

(Cai hums the song.)

Host: Apologizing through music. It sounds very good.

Again, through the praise towards Zhao Zhao's song that was written for his mother, the respect towards the parents and family was underlined as an important virtue to not only Chinese people but also everybody in the world. And revealing Cai's song to her mom, which was supposed to be a personal secret, on television represented an idea that after a fight, the children should feel guilt and that they should apologize to their parents.

Chapter 8: Final

During the final round, 8 remaining contestants competed for the title of “year’s best Chinese song”. 4 of them performed with 4 groups of established musicians from Taiwan and mainland China, while the other 4 performed with their mentors. The audience in the studio voted for what they collectively considered to be the 2 best contestants/songs, and at last 101 judges from the media voted in what led to choosing the champion. In this chapter I will focus on three rituals that took place during the final: the introduction of the contestants, the performance with successful senior musicians and the comments from the mentors. These rituals were constructed around the category of “reality”, which means that the final was constructed as a place that presented the reality of Chinese music and musicians. Through these rituals, the credibility of the final round was certified because the contestants were supposed to be their authentic energetic selves, especially if the “root” of them and their music were somehow connected with China or Chinese culture and they appeared to contribute to Chinese pop music culture. The norms that were transmitted were that good musicians should consider themselves as successors, promoters and integral parts of Chinese traditional culture and pop music culture, and they should be able to make Chinese pop music recognized by the world.

8.1 Introductory videos of the contestants

Before the contestants’ performances, short scenes were presented in which the contestants somehow went back to what was a kind of starting point or origin of themselves. I would like to call it the ritual of “finding the origin”. Through this ritual, they were supposed to become themselves even more, closer to something authentic, and to gain some kind of energy that was supposed to be important for the performance in the final. The final’s credibility was verified because it was where the contestants truly were themselves, and the final was distinguished as a very special place that could present reality. I will analyze how the contestants took part in the ritual and what kind of norms the ritual transmitted. I will also

compare the norms during the final to the previous parts of the program in order to see how different norms of good Chinese musicians/music were negotiated through the contestants' actions in rituals.

Contestant Huo Zun, as noted, connected his love for music, his song “Juan Zhu Lian” and even his identity as a musician, closely to his mother during the early part and also during semi-final of the show. When the mentors asked how he writes music, he did not emphasize the Chineseness (*zhongguo feng*, 中国风) as his sole style either: “In the beginning I generally wrote pop-style songs. Then I also wrote R&B, country and Chinese-style music.” However, in the video that was presented in the final, he strongly connected his song with Chinese traditional culture. At first, he was shown playing piano at home. We can hear his narration:

I used to make music behind closed doors and entertain myself. Now for the sake of this performance, I went to the south to collect materials and inspirations (*caifeng*, 采风). I visited the ancient towns and tried to feel how ancient people felt when they created art.



Figure 11. Huo Zun sits on the boat in an ancient Chinese town.

We see him sitting in a boat (see Fig 9), touching the water, being surrounded by scenery typical of southern China: a narrow river, a stone bridge and wooden columns. Then we see him walking through old corridors, touching the Chinese inscriptions on the wall, and imitating the game of ancient artists “qushui liushang 曲水流觞” (An ancient drinking ceremony between artists) (see Fig 10). “I hope I can find the real meaning and soul for this song in the traditional Chinese culture.” In the end we see him writing a big Chinese character “calm (jing, 静)” in calligraphy and saying “I hope people can feel the soul of the ancient style”.

Through Huo Zun’s action of leaving home, going back to the ancient Chinese town, executing activities involved with Chinese traditional cultural symbols, this ritual of finding origin represented the social norm which was that a Chinese artist ought to root his artistic identity or “soul” deeply in the Chinese traditional culture, and realize himself as a part of Chinese culture, a successor.



Figure 12. Huo Zun experiences *qushui liushang*.

However, Huo Zun’s symbolic compliance with the norm of being an artist that carries on the

Chinese cultural tradition did not happen suddenly. He started to perform the song with an amplified traditional Chinese characteristic according to his mentor's instructions. In actuality, all the mentors expressed their musical preference: a combination between Chinese elements and western music styles, and they were very fond of the contestants who could fit this expectation. Therefore we can see traditional Chinese instruments, calligraphy, Chinese ink painting, folk dance and Chinese traditional elements as such were also repetitively added to some other contestants' songs and performance during the semi-final and the final. As the majority of the performances were similarly executed, I will conveniently go on using Huo Zun's case as a representative example here.

During the blind audition, Liu Huan clearly stated his ideas and ambitions for the song: "I really want this kind of song. Chinese-style. (...) I've been trying to combine the traditional Chinese elements with western music style." So when Huo Zun chose Liu Huan as his mentor, he chose the direction for his song. During the semi-final, Liu Huan restructured the lyrics into the style of classical Chinese and added two pieces of Chinese traditional instruments, *xiao* (箫) and *pipa* (琵琶), that did not appear in Huo Zun's original arrangement. Moreover, unlike prior performances, the lyrics were presented as calligraphy on the screen when he performed the songs. After the performance, Huo Zun expressed gratefulness: "It was difficult to adapt to the new arrangement. (...) How mature has my raw demo become!" So it seemed very natural that folk dance, Chinese ink painting, and Chinese drums were also added into the performance during the final round to show the full embrace of the Chinese traditional elements. By performing the song this way, Huo Zun acted according to his mentor's expectations, and he complies with the norm that music should be a combination of Chinese elements and western music style.

In terms of another finalist, Xie Di, it appeared his musical identity was also connected to a bigger map in the video. During the blind audition, he was introduced as a hip-hop musician who worked in his hometown of Chengdu and rapped in the local Chengdu dialect. He brought a song called "I Don't Go to Work Tomorrow" which expressed his resistance to repetitive white-collar work and his embrace of his true passion in life: hip-hop music. He

also confessed his resistance to standard mandarin when it came to rapping: “All of my songs are rapped in Chengdu dialect. I can’t find an attitude by using mandarin because it feels like I’m covering other people’s stuff.” Before the semi-final he seemed to be a musician who strongly based his identity on his hometown, Chengdu, and refused to follow the norm of singing in mandarin. However, musically this did not crush with the mentors’ expectations as they were looking for a combination of Chinese elements (Chengdu dialect) and western style music (hip-hop).

In the introductory video we can see that his mentor Cai Jianya, in the name of cheering for him, showed him videos in which hip-hop musicians from all over China gave Xie Di their wishes that were spoken with their own dialects such as Qingdao, Cantonese, Southern Min and Shanghai. (see Fig 11) One of them said: “I wish you show the energy of our Chinese hip-hop.” Xie Di commented on the videos: “(When I saw them) it’s like seeing my comrades (*zhanyou*, 战友). We are all fighting for Chinese hip-hop.” Xie Di, who rapped in his native Chengdu dialect, as other hip-hop musicians who rapped in their own dialects, was included in the map of Chinese-speaking rappers, and he apparently seemed to agree with this categorization. Looking at these supportive videos, Xie Di was not directly a ritual of actively finding an origin, but it displayed how he realized he was not alone. The norm here is that all local hip-hop musicians ought to consider themselves as a part of Chinese music culture and attempt to contribute to it.

Contestant Zhang Ling, who brought a Chinese blues song, was neither a foreigner nor a minority person. He played in Chinese bands during the 1980s, but later he went to Australia to study jazz and blues music, “throwing away the chance to succeed (in mainland China)” according to his friends. In the introductory video, he went back to Beijing to meet some old band mates who he had not met for 7 to 8 years. Traditional-style buildings were ever-present in the background, and Zhang Ling and his old friends were shown drinking and eating together. They pointed out their long-lasting passion for blues music: “We have always been playing a lot of blues.” Zhang Ling also stated: “Making music needs all my passion. Therefore I went back to Beijing and found the friends who played music with me. (...) Being

with them again gave me an invisible energy.”



Figure 13. Another Chinese hip-hop artist encourages Xie Di (left).

Later when mentor Cai Jianya asked him why he presented the song on stage like a gathering of old friends, Zhang said: “Blues should go back to its roots. This time I went back to see some old friends.” Blues music is rooted in the lives and music of African-American slaves. Therefore the “root” he mentioned here seemed to have nothing to do with African-American music tradition, but rather the time he started as a musician in Beijing. Instead of emphasizing the music experience he had abroad that probably helped him learn “the purist blues”, the ritual of going back to old friends underlined the fact that Zhang Ling was a founding member of Chinese blues music, who “makes an effort” to make “Chinese blues” (*zhongwen bulusi*, 中文布鲁斯) in China. During the blind audition, Zhang Ling was praised by the mentors as a persevering individual artist who did not give up on what he liked, while during the final he was also put into a bigger picture. His role resembled that of Xie Di’s, which is to contribute their musical knowledge and skills in order to make the Chinese music culture more interesting and varied.



Figure 14. Xiang Yahong stands in the center of Beijing Worker's Stadium.

Similar to Xie Di and Zhang Ling, finalist Xiang Yahong, who played a metal rock song, expressed his wish to stand out in the Chinese music scene. He stressed his personal dream as an individual during the blind audition: “My biggest dream is to form the best metal band in China.” And in the semi-final he stated the same wish: “I want all the Chinese people to hear my rock music.” However, in the video during the final, we see him walk in the street in Beijing and stand in the stage center of Beijing Worker's Stadium (see Fig 12.), which is one of the biggest venues and landmarks in Beijing, looking around. He said in the introductory video: “I want the whole world to hear the Chinese rock music of our generation.” Worker's Stadium became a place that symbolized a musician's success in China and a standpoint for a musician to face the world. Xiang symbolically included himself in a generation of rock musicians who represented China and faced the audience all over the world. Therefore, as Xie Di and Zhang Ling, Xiang was also shown going through a transformation in terms of the compliance of norms. At first, they stood out as individuals who made their own styles of music, while in the end they fit neatly into the norm of musicians who would contribute to the development, globalization and reputation of Chinese music.

Finalists Ling Kai and Moxi Zishi's journeys of finding origin were quite different from Huo Zun's. As evidenced by the video, they went back to their real hometowns instead of symbols of traditional Chinese culture. In terms of Ling Kai, she did not go back to Singapore but chose China's Fujian province as a destination. "My dad told me that I'm the fourth generation of Chinese-Singaporean, and our hometown is in Fujian. So I want to go find my root." As I wrote earlier, she was presented as Beijing-drifter who left her hometown and chased her own dreams. But by going through the ritual of finding her "root" in China, she was actually coming home and recognized Chineseness as a part of her identity.



Figure 15. Ling Kai is in the Huang family's ancestral shrine, praying.

We see her talk with local Fujian people on the street, step into the Huang family's ancestral shrine and pray to her ancestors. (see Fig 13) At the same time we can hear her voice-over: "When I stepped into the ancestral shrine, I started to have a completely different feeling. Maybe I didn't realize before that I'm a person with the surname 'Huang' that was passed down through generations." She was acting like she just realized her blood relationship with a Chinese family that she now came back to pay respect to. Following that we see an old person who is dressed in a Chinese suit (*tangzhuang*, 唐装), write down "leaves going back to the roots (*luoye guigen*, 落叶归根, means "going home") in calligraphy and give it to Ling Kai

who politely accepted it. Next, we hear her say: “It’s music that made me come back here. It let me know where I came from and where I’m heading to.” (see Fig 14) She complied with the norm of being an ethnic Chinese person who regarded China as her root and worshiped the Chinese ancestors. In the end of the video she said: “Now I’m full of energy because I’m not alone any more.” It does not matter that, in fact, she did not grow up in China, did not know much about China and she “didn’t realize” that she was a part of the Huang family until recently. Through this ritual of finding the root, she symbolically transferred from a “lonely Singaporean girl” to a wanderer that went back back home.



Figure 16. Ling Kai accepts the calligraphy.

Ling Kai’s song was a rock-style love song that described the feeling of being alone again after a hurtful end to a love affair. There appeared to be a need to connect her to a bigger picture in order to fit the title of the program *Song of China*. The program had some voice-over narrators that never separated the concepts of “Chinese-language (*huayu*, 华语)” and “China (*zhongguo*, 中国)”. Sometime the announcer said: “(The program) supports and promotes Chinese-language original music” while other times it said: “(The program) discovers China’s original musicians” or “This is an explosion of China’s original music”. In

terms of Ling Kai, her action apparently blurred the boundary between ethnic Chinese and China. Another example was Taiwanese contestant Suby who mixed up these concepts during the program. In the blind audition she said: “I hope one day I can represent ethnic Chinese (*huaren*, 华人) and step on an international stage.” But in the semi-final she said: “America can come to China to buy the royalty of this program from *us*. Song of America. But sorry, it’s made in China.” Mentor Yang Kun even called her “patriotic”. Therefore, Suby also reached the point of including herself in the map of China as the program progressed, something that further obscured the concepts of what constitutes China, Chinese people and Chinese music and musicians.

Contestant Moxi Zishi’s song “If I Die I Must Die in Your Hands” was a mandarin folk-style passionate love song that was adapted from a poem. During the blind audition and the semi-final, rather than emphasize his Yi minority background, his image was instead closely connected with his Japanese girlfriend for whom the song was written. However, in the semi-final, Yi-language chorus was added to the song, and furthermore, in the introductory video in the final, he went back to his hometown, a village of Yi minority in the Sichuan province. We see Moxi Zishi, in his casual black sweater and pants, holding hands with Yi people in their traditional clothes, dancing around a bonfire. His uncle said: “Moxi is the first one in our village that went outside to make music. Very brave.” The Yi people’s representation here was rather simplified and orthodox. They seemed isolated from the outside world while Moxi represented an individual that had left his hometown and searched for his connection with the outside, something that was praised.

Moxi was also shown singing in Yi language and playing guitar for a Yi infant, the infant’s grandmother and other elders near him. (see Fig 15) He said: “Some folks (*fulao xiangqin*, 父老乡亲) in my hometown don’t even know how to speak mandarin, but they taught me a lot.” Here we see an adult male who returned to his hometown and received praises and recognition from his family, and by staying with them and playing for them, he was symbolically paying back for what they had given him.

The scene then cut to him drinking water from a stream, lying and sitting on the grass with his home village, mountains and cows in the background, and in the end shouting to the mountains. (see Fig 16) At same time we can hear his voice-over: “All of this gave me endless inspiration and resources. (...) No matter where I go, I’ll never forget the freedom and ease that my hometown’s mountain water and earth brings me.” This ritual of walking around and physically touching the water, mountain and earth, which were the symbols of Yi people’s closeness with the nature, constructed Moxi as a Yi person who rooted his identity in his ethnic culture.



Figure 17. Moxi Zishi singing for Yi people.

Moxi’s mentor Yang Kun said in the beginning of the video: “In order to present this song perfectly, he has to keep being true and earthy (*zhenshi he chunpu*, 真实和淳朴) which (are the qualities) derived from the Yi people's mountains.” His view communicated a norm that minority people should be authentic and down to the earth. Though this view was rather orthodox, by returning home, feeling free and easy, Moxi was presented as being himself, thereby fulfilling his mentor’s preconceived notions, and it furthermore also showed his compliance with the norm of being a minority person whose true and honest quality came

from his Yi background, and whose music talent contributed to the culture of Yi.



Figure 18. Moxi Zishi sits on the grass with Yi village in the background.

The last 2 contestants, 42 year old film music composer Ma Shangyou and 24 year old Wang Siyuan, did not go back to their families in their respective videos. Instead, they were shown going back to their universities. Ma was walking around the school by himself while saying: “When I knew I was going to enter the final, I felt lost. It’s difficult to make this song better. In order to relax myself, I decided to take a walk in the campus. I’m trying to avoid distractions and to find the version of myself who had faith and chased dreams.” Wang was shown playing a concert in his school and he said: “Shengyang Music College was where my music path started. (...) I didn’t know that so many people would come to see me. The encouragement and wishes from the teachers and the students make me gain more courage and faith in making original music.” They both expressed the feeling of wanting to return to or to recover their young selves, to prior versions of themselves who were supposed to be confident, courageous, idealistic and who did not care about gain and loss. And schools were the symbolic places where these qualities of youth used to exist. By going back to school, they symbolically “collected” the young qualities into themselves in order to be able to play in

the final. The ritual of getting back to the young state of mind was more a performance, for the sake of playing in the final, than being their real present selves. However, it transmitted the norm that good musicians should always be energetic, full of ambitions and that they should be feeling positive.

8.2 Performing with the seniors

During the final, the contestants performed their songs in versions that had been modified one more time. In addition, each contestant was accompanied or “helped” by one or a pair of senior musicians whose musical styles were relevant to that of the respective contestant. I consider performing with the seniors as a media ritual because, at first, the boundaries between predecessor and descendant, teacher and student were crossed. The contestants were fully aware of how famous and important these seniors were, and they kept expressing their respect, their appreciation and their feelings of being overwhelmed by a superior’s favor. The mentors also showed respect for these established musicians. For example, “teacher (*laoshi*, 老师)”, “god (*dashen*, 大神)”, “predecessor (*qianbei*, 前辈)”, “pioneer (*xianqu*, 先驱)” were words frequently used by both the contestants and the mentors to describe these senior musicians. Contestant Huo Zun said after his performance with Taiwanese singer Fei Yuqing: “I was able to sing on the same stage with a teacher I admire so much. I can die without regret.” Contestant Ling Kai wore an enormous smile on her face after singing with Taiwanese singer-songwriter Wu Qingfeng: “I feel so grateful. I’m the happiest person in the world.”

Through this ritual, the contestants’ status were not only separated from the seniors’, their identities were also connected to that of the seniors’ and a bigger context that was related to these seniors. In other words, the contestants represented the descendants of a particular style of music, a particular kind of musical path. For instance, after Moxi Zishi sang with senior rocker Zheng Jun, Moxi’s mentor Yang Kun turned to the audience and said: “Let’s clap hard for the predecessor of Chinese rock music, Zheng Jun!” In terms of the style of combining

minority musical elements with rock music, Zheng Jun was one of the first to do so in China. Moxi Zishi who made music of a similar style stood for a descendant of that particular musical path. And after mentor Zhou Huajian sang together with contestant Wang Siyuan, mentor Liu Huan commented: “This song must have brought Huajian back to 20 years ago.” This implied that Wang Siyuan’s song resembled what Zhou had done long ago, and Wang Siyuan was presented as somebody who inherited the musical treasure from his senior.

However, this ritual also caused another transformation to happen to the contestants, namely that they were shown approved and recognized by the professional seniors in their musical field. At first, the contestants’ songs and their talent were praised by the seniors. After the performances, the seniors got a chance to talk about why they wanted to “help” these contestants. Most mentioned reason was that they were fond of the songs and honestly thought that the contestants were talented and would be loved by a large audience. For example, band Yu Quan talked about contestant Xiang Yahong: “Nobody won’t be shocked by his passionate voice.” And Zheng Jun spoke highly of contestant Moxi’s song: “I think the way to measure the quality of a song is whether you can listen to it 20 times and still think it’s good. I heard this one 30 to 40 times now.” After hearing the compliments from the seniors, the contestants either bowed or expressed the gratefulness for being recognized by them. Contestant Wang Siyuan mentioned: “I’m 24 years old and I sing my song with teacher Zhou Huajian. This is not a small wish anymore; It’s a beginning. I’m starting to look forward to my music path in the future.”

Secondly, the mentors kept saying how perfect the contestants manage to sing together with the seniors. For instance, after Huo Zun sings with the Chinese-style predecessor Fei Yuqing, mentor Liu Huan commented: “I’m breathing together with these two. Everything is so smooth, seamless. (...) After adjusting (*mohe*, 磨合) again and again, Huo Zun has become very proficient (*shulian*, 熟练).” This comment seemed to imply that Huo Zun’s vocal skills had finally reached the standard of Fei Yuqing by having persevered through hard work and practice.

The ritual of performing with the seniors put the newly-started musicians in the big context of the development and history of the Chinese music industry. As the seniors appeared supportive and teacher-like, and the juniors appeared grateful and respectful, the potential commercial competition between the seniors and the juniors was ignored. Instead, it is implied, the existence of both seniors and juniors contributed to something wonderful which is Chinese music. Furthermore, these new and inexperienced musicians should be recognized and approved by these seniors, or authorities in particular music genres in order to be credible.

8.3 Comments from the mentors

As in the blind audition and the semi-final, the mentors still commented on the performances. Because of the appearance of the senior musicians, many comments were given to how successful the cooperation was, as was discussed in the previous part. Despite that, as the audience in the studio were supposed to vote for the contestants, the mentors also had to say something to these voters in order to convince them to support the contestants.

Besides the talent of the contestants, the mentors had a tendency to focus on how much the contestants and their music would matter to the Chinese music scene and its future:

Cai Jianya: Hip-hop music indeed has a small audience in terms of Chinese-language music, but I think it's as valuable as other styles of music. When I heard Xie Di for the first time, I felt I had heard a hope for China's hip-hop.

Zhou Huajian: Within the pop music industry, Wang Siyuan is one of few who's musically well-educated, which I've always cared so much about. I hope there will be more well-educated young people joining our pop music scene to make it more solid.

Cai Jianya: Female musicians are few. Why is that? We need to discuss this in order to make things better. When I heard Ling Kai, I heard another hope for us female artists. Please help us make this

group bigger.

Liu Huan: There is music. There is everyone's effort. I hope everybody can support the big effort that these musicians (contestant Zhang Ling and his old band mates) have made for this kind of music all these years.

The criteria here is that the contestants had been devoting or would devote themselves to the Chinese music scene and make Chinese music better as a whole. According to the comments, Xie Di's hip-hop can make Chinese music more varied; Wang Siyuan can contribute solid knowledge and technique; as a female artist, Ling Kai can improve the status of female artists; Zhang Ling has also been contributing to the variety of Chinese music and his long-time effort adds to his credibility. It seemed the audience's votes mattered to creating a better future for the Chinese music and they should not only vote based on how they liked the music. The individual musicians were supposed to be judged by their potential contribution for the collective-content of Chinese music here.

When the competition had nearly ended, the final 2 contestants, Huo Zun and Moxi Zishi would face the voting from the judges from the media. Their mentors, again, were supposed to say something to encourage and convince the judges to support their students:

Liu Huan: This Chinese-style song is very calm, meaningful and beautiful. It'll be sung and listened to by a large number of people. In such an impetuous era, it's so precious that as a singer-songwriter, he could perform a Chinese-style song so calmly (*qiding shenxian*, 气定神闲).

Yang Kun: At first we thought his music could appeal to a small group of the audience. But he has stayed till now, which proves that he's recognized by the mass. This little guy is very capable of making music and he has a strong energy. If he can be recognized further, his path will stretch out of China and lead to the world.

From both Liu and Yang's comment we can see a quality that was supposed to be reflected by

both of the final songs: They suited the tastes of the masses and could be easily understood and accepted by a large number of people.

Furthermore, Liu praised Huo Zun's performance as "calmly" in "an impetuous era". This suits the quality of the Confucian "gentleman" (Ronen and Shenkar 1987) who "maintain self-control regardless of the situation and thus conform to the ideal of *xinping qihe* (心平气和) - 'being perfectly calm'". (Silin 1976) With this quality and his so-called Chinese-style song, Huo Zun was appreciated as a gentleman who conveyed the spirit of the traditional Chinese culture. In terms of Moxi Zishi, mentor Yang emphasized on his possibility of being recognized by the world. This reflected the awareness and urge in the contemporary Chinese culture world of being able to globalize Chinese pop culture.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In this thesis, by using analyzing tools such as content analysis and the theories of media ritual and the ritual transmission of social norms, I have been trying to unfold Chinese national-TV reality pop music talent show *The Song of China/Sing My Song (season 1)*, its rituals and how the rituals transmitted the norms of good Chinese musician and music. No matter how much the program has claimed that it emphasized good original music, it was not intrinsically different than the other TV music programs that focus on rituals, contests, awards, nostalgia, etc. instead of relying primarily on the music in order to attract audiences that might not be interested in music itself (Frith 2002). *SOC* was surely ritualized. The rituals in *SOC* were organized around categories such as “ordinariness”, “reality”, “authenticity”, and worked to distinguish the world inside the program/media from the ordinary world that is outside the program/media. And the participants’ actions and words also naturalized these categories and distinctions. No matter how much the program claimed to embrace original and creative musicians, these musicians had to be shown as somehow ordinary folks first, even if they were professional musicians, and then they, step by step, seemed to be transformed, becoming more confident and professional thanks to the modification and other rituals they went through. And their songs, too, went through considerable changes which were supposed to make the original songs better.

The program did not touch upon the real reasons (for example, state’s oppression, incomplete copyright law, etc.) why many great Chinese original musicians could not make their own way to success. Instead, *SOC* presented us its own version of how creative music can be made and what the real musicians do and how they act. Through rituals, the wider value that *SOC/CCTV* was a place that could present, shape even stand for good Chinese music and authentic musicians was reinforced and naturalized. An evidence showing that *SOC*’s representational privilege was naturalized and had great impact is that it surely was growing as a popular platform for original and creative musicians. For example, a legendary 47 year old drummer, Zhao MUYANG, who experienced the ups and downs of Chinese rock music and

is currently without a steady job, angrily turned down the invitation of *SOC* season 1, but he appeared in season 2. He said after his performance:

After I saw season 1 and the mentors, I thought I should come here and let more people hear the music from my hometown... My parents have seen season 1 and they saw so many my old friends on this stage. They said to me, 'They could appear on TV. You have played drums for more than 30 years. Why can't we see you on TV?'... And my kid was born recently. I hope he'll see that dad has played on this stage. (Zhao 2015)

My original purpose was to study the norms of good Chinese music, yet the majority of the norms that the rituals communicated were norms of how good Chinese musicians, even how good Chinese people should act and what they should do. However, I will summarize the norms of good Chinese music first. In general, a good Chinese song should sound honest, beautiful and creative. Being honest requires the musicians to express something they feel deeply and sing it out with a sincere voice. Being creative mainly requires the musicians to combine Chinese cultural elements (traditional culture, dialects, Chinese symbols, etc.) with western music forms. Yet a musician should not be too unique that the authority (the mentors) could not recognize the style or categorize the music. Music like rock, which could have expressed uneasiness, anger or protest of politics and society, were related to being honest, powerful, striking, direct and basically apolitical. Rock musicians should be able to represent the mass but only in a way that they belong to the ordinary world. All the songs should accept the modification from the authority, which is supposed to make the songs better in order to fit the authorities' concept of good songs.

Next, I will discuss the norms of good Chinese musicians/people. A good Chinese musician/person should somehow be ordinary. He or she can come from anywhere, have any kind of job, sometimes have physical or mental shortcomings. There should be some kind of truth, authenticity, simplicity and honesty in this ordinariness itself that should be a part of the Chinese identity. But a person should also have a strong desire for success and hold his/her own dreams. Moreover, this good ordinary person should always be their real selves. An

individual's true self is preferred to be energetic (a sign of spiritual youth), confident and honest. If a person feels a little lost in the path of life, in order to restore and find the true self again, he or she should physically return to his or her hometown or where their ancestors have lived, or schools where the person has spent time during his or her youth. It is better if one's hometown is in the countryside or a part of minority tribe since those lands that are not entirely civilized typically and conveniently mean purity and authenticity.

Secondly, a person should have some certain virtues. For example, one should be optimistic and passionate even when he or she faces difficulties and failures in life, smiling and feeling grateful. And when it comes to work, one should be determined, hardworking, dedicated, serious and persevering, never giving up. One should almost be an idealist with strong willpower, believing that one day success will come.

Though a person should pursue dreams and desire success, he or she should also be caring, sympathetic, reliable, and have good relationship with their close family and friends, especially fulfill filial duties to and get recognized by their parents. Many stated that they wanted to pursue the music dream for the sake of their family and friends in order to repay their favors and support. The program delivered a message that one should dare express and display their true self and dare chase one's dream for one's own sake, while one should also write songs or accomplish their dream for close family and friends. This reminded me of what Slavoj Zizek wrote on authoritarian capitalism, global capitalism and Asian traditional values:

The market is a ruthless place where people sustain grievous injuries. It is hard to reconcile yourself to this, if all you are offered in return is the opportunity to satisfy your whims. It is far easier if you can fall back on traditional values to justify your indifference to other people's fate in ethical terms. "I did it for my parents." "I did it so my cousins will be able to study." Such rationales are far more palatable than "I did it for myself". (Zizek 2015)

This is an interesting insight on why traditional family values are emphasized in a society full of cruel competitions like those that permeate the Chinese society. By emphasizing that

competing in the talent show is for others' sake, the contestants were presented as less selfish and rather as being caring human beings. In 2013, a law "Protection of the Rights and Interests of Elderly People" was issued and it had 9 clauses that listed the duties of children and their obligation to tend to their old parents (Wong 2013). This is evidence that the social norm transmitted by the program supports and reinforces official ideology.

Thirdly, one should be able to cooperate with others and contribute to the success and unity of a group that is led by the authority, and this also symbolizes the improvement of the person him- or herself. Learning to cooperate with others (a bigger band, dancers, etc.), a person is supposed to have control, be more confident and free. A person should try hard to finish the task that the authority gives to him or her and the spirit of hard work is praised. The authority should be respected, and apparent disagreement with the authority's arrangement should not be shown, except for some confusion. As a member of a group, one should contribute his or her energy and talent in order to make the group a small society that is full of happiness and positive energy.

At last, one should consider oneself as a part of the Chinese culture. This obtains several meanings. One should consider Chinese culture as inspiration to create new art, thereby being a successor of the traditional Chinese culture; one should consider that one is tied with mainland China because of blood relationship, no matter where one was born and raised, abroad or with minority background; one should consider oneself as a part of a bigger group of people that work on making Chinese pop music as a whole better. To consider this point with the past history between CCTV and pop music, we can see that CCTV is still carrying on its agenda of trying to "smoothing out the differences among Chinese in different geopolitical and geographical locations" (Fung 2008, p. 99) and reinforce a greater Chinese nationalism with mainland as the center of this pan-Chineseness.

The norms apparently reinforce the ideologies that the state has been promoting. In general, ambition, authenticity, individuality, positive attitude, teamwork and respecting the authority were expected from the good Chinese musicians/people. And traditional Chinese values such

as filial piety were promoted as legitimate reasons for cruel competitions. This norm also supports the state's promotion of traditional values. The emphasis on globalizing Chinese culture, including pop music and *SOC* itself also indirectly supports the culture policy in China which "was designed to evade the explicit definition of popular culture" and "connects popular culture to the national culture and to identities" (Fung 2008, p. 195).

From oppressing to finding new ways of symbiotically existing with individual creative musicians, through changing its own production method, being inspired by a global TV format, and finally presenting the reality pop music talent show *SOC*, CCTV found a new and obscure playground to alter the reality. *SOC* was not only a successful attempt by CCTV to regain a part of the market, power and credibility that has been occupied by some local TV stations for the decade, furthermore its attempt of globalizing Chinese pop culture may raise the position of China in a global hierarchy and lead to Chinese public's nationalist pride inside the country. The opinions on how meaningful *SOC* is and how proud it makes Chinese people feel are not rare from both the participants of the show and the audience.

However, the problems between Chinese musicians, the music industry and market and the state will not go away in a short term. Appearing on CCTV may mean that independent musicians can get famous and be awarded more opportunities, but at the same time they are supporting a system that includes them in the discourse of the state and leaves them nearly at the bottom of the power pyramids. There are other places, such as the ever-growing internet, music festivals and concerts, where independent musicians may challenge the norms and the power of the state. But in China where television and state television CCTV are still popular and available to the majority of the Chinese population, the social norms that are promoted by CCTV and programs like *SOC* will have a great impact on how Chinese music will be, how musicians and people will perceive the society, and how they act.

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