

**The New Spectatorships of Idol Production Reality Shows in Queer, Neoliberal, and
Commercialized Perspectives**

Irene (Qinyi) Liu

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Introduction | 1 |
| The Non-gender Gaze | 5 |
| -Androgynous Gaze | |
| -Desexualized Queer Gaze | |
| -Parental Gaze | |
| Promotion of Talent of Hanging-out | 15 |
| Platformization | 21 |
| Political Stimulation | 26 |

Introduction

What is an idol?

The idol culture was originated in Japan, after the release of the 1963 French film *Cherchez l'idole*. The main actress Sylvie Vartan was admired for her musical talent and adorable looks by the Japanese youth, leading the Japanese music industry to refer to singers with attractive appearance “idol”.

Following the trend of Japan, South Korean entertainment companies saw the huge potential in fandom market as idols are followed by many young people. In South Korea, the role of an idol is hybrid. Not only do they sing, they also dance, rap, model for magazine covers, herald for products or charity organizations. They become curated public image that entertains the audience and maintains an intimate relationship with fans.

Influenced by the Japanese and Korean idol culture, especially the k-pop wave, the Chinese idols refer to young and famous icons in music industry, who are primarily singers, dancers, rappers, and entertainers, either as a member of a group or a solo act.

Idol production reality shows

Following the trend of Produce series in South Korea, Chinese video production companies, Tencent and iQiyi, programmed idol production reality shows that also select and produce idols. These shows imitate the trainee system in South Korea except that they make the audiences a part of the decision process. The trainee system was developed by S.M entertainment in South Korea. It is a wholesome system of training idols. Agency companies first scout for potential idols and sign them as trainees in the company. Trainee is the title for people who are in the practice of being an idol but haven't officially debuted. The trainees will receive strict training of singing, dancing, and rapping so as to become an idol, and this process usually spans years or decades, depending on when the company allows them to debut.

The idol production shows build up idol music groups by mimicking the idol training system. Generally, each show gathers plentiful trainees from different agency companies and has them compete in rounds. The trainees who survive through all the rounds and rank the top can debut in the music group of the show. If the show designates nine people to debut, then the top nine trainees can debut as the final team. If the show designates eleven people to debut, the top eleven trainees can debut. The ranking of the trainees is based on the votes they get from the general audiences. Each show has its platform of voting. Since the start of the show, the audiences can vote for their favorite trainees as the show airs. Each competition round usually corresponds to the preparation and final show of a public stage performance. After the end of each competition round, the trainees ranked after a certain position are eliminated, and the remaining trainees will continue the race. The two series of idol production shows in China are *Youth With You* and *Produce Camp*, produced by iQiyi and Tencent respectively.

The biggest difference between idol production shows and other survival talent shows is that idol production shows display a different perspective of the participants to the audiences. While survival talent shows, such as *Super Girl*, display mostly the stage performance to the audiences with little off-stage clips, the idol production shows display more “off-stage” clips of the trainees along with the performance. The “off-stage” clips include various kinds of shots, such as shots in practice room, during trainees’ playtime, during their interviews or other activities. The diverted attention on stage performance and professional skills invokes questioning and criticism on the threshold of being idols and on the meaning of this interactive and voyeuristic spectatorship. Past scholars have argued that by exposing the whole process of the idol production, the audiences value the growth of the trainees more than their absolute skill levels. Some also argues that the skill requirement for trainees and produce media content that is solely for the audiences’ sake. However, in my perspective, the idol production shows’ merits lie not in the “skill” sphere, but the “person” sphere. By weakening the weight of

professional skills in idol selection process, the audiences can pay attention to the “person” qualities of the trainees, such as their personalities, virtues, and thoughts. In this paper, I use *Youth With You Season 3* (YWY3) as a case study to illustrate that specific spectatorships of the idol production shows appreciate the “normalness” of stars and liberate the stars and audiences from their traditionally gendered spectatorship positions. The “daily life” spectatorship in YWY3 prioritizes the talent of “hanging-out” over talent of professional performance for trainees. The “non-gendered” spectatorship sets free the audiences and trainees on screen from the traditional spectator and spectacle positions.

Overview of YWY3

Youth With You Season 3 is the currently running all-male idol production show produced by iQiyi. It was premiered on February 17, 2021 and has aired sixteen episodes (each with two parts). There are 118 trainees participating in the show. There are four competition rounds in total and right now the show is the second to last round. Since the beginning of the show, the audiences can vote for their favorite trainees during designated time. During the first two competition rounds, the regular iQiyi users have nine votes every day and they can vote for at most nine trainees, each one with at most one vote. VIP iQiyi users have eighteen votes every day and they can vote for each trainee at most twice every day. At the end of each round, the trainees are ranked by the votes they get in this round and the lowest half are eliminated. During each competition round, the trainees are divided into teams to perform for the public performance at the end of this round. During each live public performance, the live audiences can vote for at most one trainee in each team. Depending on the rules of each performance, the members from top-voted teams can get extra votes to their ranking vote value.

Non-gendered Gaze

YWY3 is an innovative mode of reality show because it subverts the traditionally dominant male gaze spectatorship in cinema, in which the male audiences fantasize themselves possessing the female characters on screen and the female audiences fantasize themselves becoming the female characters on screen. As the main consumers of the star industry are urban young girls who are financially capable, have the need for emotional support, and have the time and energy to engage in fandom activities, the reality show producers start to alter the dominant spectatorship to fulfill female audiences' desire. It's observable that YWY3 put male bodies under the spotlight for the female audiences' pleasure. While many would argue that the show reverses the male gaze, I would argue that does more than reversing the gender roles in the spectator and spectacle position. YWY3 does more than putting the female audiences into the masculine spectator position and putting the male trainees into the feminine spectacle position. It erases the gender distinction between the two positions. In this androgynous spectatorship, the show positions the audiences as an androgynous and desexualized parent to the image on screen. Rather than being a masculine reviewer who projects self onto the active masculine characters and possess the passive feminine characters, the audiences now project themselves onto the androgynous characters and establish a desexualized, queer family relationship with them.

Androgynous gaze

Traditional gaze is usually binary as male or female. However, YWY3 blurs the gender boundaries and provides the audiences with a non-binary position of looking at the characters on screen. Because the characters are equipped with desired qualities of both genders, the audiences can look at these characters as projections of selves or a counterparty they wish to hold onto, instead of looking at them only from a heterosexual position to possess them. Instead

of either identifying with or possessing, the audiences can both identify and possess the androgynous characters at the same time.

First, the traditional male or female gaze conditions are not met for YWY3. In Mulvey's male gaze theory, for a male gaze or female gaze to occur, there need to be identifiable masculine characters who the spectators identify with and feminine characters who the spectators want to possess. However, in YWY3, there are only male trainees, which erases the distinction of sex on screen.

Second, all of the trainees possess the desired masculine and feminine characteristics and thus become ideal androgynous images. On the outside, the trainees have feminine appearance by putting on cosmetics, keeping a slim body figure, and wearing girlish outfits sometimes. Makeups, skin cares, and hairstyle products, the traditional female beauty-care products, become the necessities for male trainees. It has become a normal state for them to wear makeups in front of the camera, whether when they are performing on the stage or just practicing during regular time. Their makeup style accords with the traditional modern Chinese female makeups—fair skin foundation and concealer to cover all the wrinkles and dots on the face, pinkish or yellowish eyeshadow and heavy eyelines to magnify the eyes, and reddish lipsticks to look more energetic. Some trainees, such as Sun Yinghao and Chen Junhao, even have long hairs. Not only the facial appearance, the standard for trainees' body figure is no longer muscular but lean, the standard pursued by modern Chinese females. Except the trainees from Xiongmao Tang, all the trainees fit into the slim standard and with no observable big chunk of muscles. When the trainees from Xiongmao Tang come to the initial evaluation stage, the mentors are surprised by their looks and even ask why they participate with such body figure. This question shows that there is indeed a mainstream standard for the trainee's figure. The trainees themselves are also aware of this standard and, like most of the girls, are afraid of gaining weight. During the interviews of trainees conducted by Huihuo, the trainees mention

that they have gained lots of weight after coming to the camp. When one mentions that the sausages sold in the store next to their camp is delicious, other trainees ask that why he eats when he has gained weight. From both the mentors and trainees' perspectives, we can see that the desired body figure for male trainees isn't muscular but thin. In addition to body figure, the clothing style for the trainees is mixed as well. Not only do they wear dark colors or manly styles, they also wear light colors, cute, and seductive styles that are traditionally considered to be feminine for male gaze. During the initial evaluation stage performance, the trainees from Haohan Entertainment all wear pink color clothes that are associated with feminine characteristics. The trainees from Shidai Fengjun wear blue and green suspenders that are associated with cute characteristics. During the first public performance, many groups wear light color clothes. In the group "Little White Horse", Lian Huaiwei wears a pink sailor's shirt, which is compared to the pink sailor's dress of Zhang Yuqi, a Chinese actress. During the second public performance, in the group "Stop Sugar", all the members wear silver or pearl necklaces, which are usually accessories for female. Thus, the trainees' outfit style is developing into a feminine tendency. While they have feminine looks on the outside, they are internally masculine with all the combative qualities of males, such as ambitious, strength, and resilience. The camp is full of official and unofficial competitions and by participating in them, the trainees exhibit these alpha male characteristics. There's no need to mention that the show itself is a survival competition. If one wants to stay, he has to beat others on ranking by performing outstandingly and gaining exposure. Within the general competition frame, there are smaller competitions. For each team performance, there is a center position and a main dance or vocal (depends on the style of the song) that trainees compete for. The team members vote for the fittest trainees. For the learning of the theme song, the mentors will evaluate each trainee's performance and give them a letter grade, for which the trainees all want to get A. There's also competition on the center of the theme song for official recording among the

trainees who get A for their theme song performance. Winning the competition requires unmeasurable hard work and perseverance during practice. On one hand, in order to perform the dances and songs well, the trainees have to use full strength from all parts of their bodies, which is energy consuming and strength demanding. From the B-rolls of the official episodes and extras, we always see the trainees soaked in sweats or sleeping in the practice room because they are so tired. Not only do the practice requires energy, they also require patience to practice over and over again to perfect each movement. The process of receiving critique from the mentors and adjusting every single move in the dance is depressing and exhaustive. The trainees must have strong mind to take in the pressure and continue their contests, which are the most desired qualities of males in the traditional point of view. Therefore, all the trainees are androgynous with male and female characteristics, the audiences can gaze upon or associate themselves with all the trainees at the same time, which makes themselves androgynous spectators as well.

The audiences can choose to look at the trainees or project themselves onto the trainees because their androgynous gaze fulfills two desires at the same time. On one hand, by weighing the male characteristics of the trainees more, the audiences can fantasize themselves to possess these trainees in a sexual way. Because they have the male hormones and personalities, they are still attractive to female fans. On the other hand, by weighing the female characteristics of the trainees more, they fantasize themselves to become these trainees. This androgynous image of female appearance with male interior is an ideal image that contemporary young females want to become. This image is endowed with feminine beauty and masculine power and the privileges associated with male. Because many young girls are in the generation of the “one-child” policy, they are raised in the same way as a boy. They also go to school, participate in extra-curricular activities, and apply for jobs, so they possess the same qualities and intelligence as boys. However, because of their biological gender, they are still in the

underpowered social group. By projecting themselves onto an image of female appearance and male body, they hope to get the same strength and rights associated with biological males while keeping their feminine qualities—slim figure, moderate makeups, delicate outfit. Hence, the female audiences become androgynous viewers who can both possess and identify with the androgynous trainees on screen.

Desexualized queer gaze

While YWY3 positions the audiences as androgynous objects, it can also desexualizes the relationship between the audiences and characters, and instead romanticizes the relationship between the same-sex characters, positioning the audiences with the characters in a queer family.

The interactions between trainees in YWY3 are edited in a way that exceeds brotherhood and are nearly comparable to a romantic relationship. The production crew has intentionally added pairing and emotion-sharing activities to emphasize the intimacy between trainees. During the first competition round, the trainees are asked to form a team of two to practice the theme song. The production crew asks the trainees to write down the other trainee they want to pair with. The pair is only valid when two trainees pick each other. This process of choosing a teammate is similar to love confession as if to form a real romantic relationship. This part has introduced the audiences to follow trainee “couples”. Actually, the pairs formed during this part—Luo Yizhou and Tang Jiuzhou, Chang Huasen and Sun Yinghao, Duan Xingxing and Liu Guanyou, Sun Yihang and Lian Huaiwei—are the most popular “couples” of YWY3 in the super-topic (the place where the users can post, reply, like, and forward other posts related to the topic) list for “couples” (CP 超话) on Weibo. The list is ranked by the data traffic and activities of users in each couple’s super-topic. In addition to choosing the partner for theme song learning, the production crew arranges popular trainee pairs to participate in extra-official activities and interviews. From these videos, the audiences are shown more

information of their intimacy, like how they talk to and touch each other or the stories happened between them. Many netusers have summarized sweet moments of trainee pairs from these videos. For example, for the pair Chang Huasen and Sun Yinghao, Sun mentions that Chang is his first pick when picking the partner for theme song learning even if Chang is a novice dancer and he himself is experienced. It's obvious that Chang wouldn't help him with learning and would require help from him. However, Sun is willing sacrifice time and energy to teach Chang just to be in one team with him. For the pair Duan Xingxing and Liu Guanyou, Duan prepares hot water for Liu when they both catch a cold during theme song learning. Liu buys ginger tea for Duan when he has a stomachache. These interactions are typical interactions between romantic couples. By showing these clips between the trainees to the audiences, the relationship between the trainees are romanticized.

In this romanticized queer relationship, the audiences are positioned as an outsider or observer rather than a participating party in traditional male or female gaze. In traditional gaze, the characters on screen form a relationship with the audiences through interactions with other characters. For example, the male protagonist builds up a relationship with female audiences, who is member of his counterparty, through his interactions with the female protagonist. The female audiences will associate themselves with the female protagonist. If a male character seduces a female character, the main purpose of this male character's body movement is to make the female audiences feel seduced. Thus, the characters, though interact with their counterparties on screen, intend to impact the audiences who are also their counterparties, so the recipients of their actions are the audiences essentially. However, in YWY3, the association between the audiences and their corresponding gender group is eliminated. According to the results of a survey about the feelings of heterosexual girls watching boy's love stories conducted by Zhang¹, the girls don't associate themselves with either characters; they just

¹ "Loving Boys Twice as Much: Chinese Women's Paradoxical Fandom of "Boys' Love" Fiction"

enjoy the romantic story between the two. For the audiences romanticizing the relationship between trainees, they also do not associate themselves with either trainee in the pair and they will not regard themselves as the recipient of a movement by one trainee to the other. With no affiliation to the characters, they just watch the couple because they like the two trainees and the interaction between them. In this way, the audiences retreat to the observer position instead of partaking in the relationship.

Parental Gaze

As the audiences position themselves as an observer of the trainees' relationship, they together form a queer family, in which the audiences regard themselves as the parent of one trainee. Because the audiences want to be close to this relationship without actually participating, the natural way of doing so is to position themselves as a family member of them. Given the scopophilia nature of YWY3, the audiences' gaze is similar to a parent's gaze. The show positions the audiences as a foster parent who perform both the role of a mother and a father. In Doane's "The moving image: pathos and the maternal", she argues that mother is generally thought to be responsible for a child's nature. Thus, a mother's gaze is predominantly the daily life of her children to ensure their health in physicality and mentality. As for father, they are considered to oversee his children's career development. His gaze is mostly concerned with the children's performance at work. YWY3 exhibits both spheres of the trainees' life and thus make the audiences both their mother and father.

The audiences are considered as foster parent because they don't have ties of blood with the trainees. They "adopt" trainees as they watch the show and choose ones who they have the strongest feeling for. As a foster parent, they skip the process of nurturing the children from birth. When they see the trainees, they are already grown-ups with appealing appearance and persona. The audiences can then "adopt", or in another word follow, the trainees who like the most. After the adoption takes place, the foster parent has to take care of the child's

development in the future. Though the trainees are mature as an adult, they are not mature as an idol, which means that they haven't gained enough public exposure, portfolio of works, recognition, and popularity. Most of them are not known to the public and some even haven't been on screen before. Hence, they are still in the newborn phase in the process of becoming an idol, "the trainee phase". Participating in the show is a starting point of their growth. Throughout the show, they practice skills, refine their personas, and accumulate public attention to grow as a mature idol. The audiences can witness the entire growth process and participate, which fulfills their duty as a foster parent for their favorite trainees.

Throughout the time being a foster parent, the audiences become androgynous as they function both as the father and the mother, possessing both the gaze of a father and a mother when watching the show. A father is always assumed to have a breadwinning role and take care of his children's professional growth. When they look at their children, they pay attention to their work performance and try to help them being promoted at work. In the case of trainees, their profession is singing and dancing on stage. A father who cares about his children's profession will look at their stage performance. In YWY3, the audiences are endowed with this paternal gaze when stage performance of the trainees are shown. At the beginning and during each round of elimination, there will be a public performance in which all the remaining trainees form teams based on the production crew's rules and perform the song they choose. This performance is displayed to the mentors and live audiences who can vote for the trainees they like in each team. Mentors' comments and audiences' votes are the evaluation of trainees' improvement or degradation "at work". The first three episodes cover the initial evaluation of trainees, which is the first time the trainees perform in the show. The mentors give each trainee a letter grade, one from A, B, C, and N (as newbies), that represents their talents according to this performance, and this letter grade will affect the order of choosing the songs and teams for the next public performance. After the initial evaluation phase is the first, the one point five,

and the second public performance, which is covered by the rest of the episodes. At these live public performances, the audiences can vote for trainees they like after each team's performance. The voting results, though different from the voting chart that determines who to debut, are an indication of how strong the trainees' performances are and whether they have made progress. They also affect who the general audiences want to vote for the debut chart. Thus, the mentors' feedbacks and the live audiences' preferences at each public performance are important information about the trainees' professional development. By unfolding this information, the show is treating audiences as the father of the trainees, who monitors the children's work performance.

In addition to father's gaze, the audiences also possess mother's gaze while watching YWY3. A mother is always assumed to have a nurturing role and care for her children's personality and health. Unlike fathers who concern the working sphere of their children, mothers weigh their children's living situations and social relationships more than professional development. This show positions the audiences as a mother by showing them the clips of trainees' daily life and extra-official activities they participate, such as interviews, games, vlogs, livestreams, and other forms of interactive video recordings. These clips reflect the physical and mental state of the trainees, their personalities, and interactions with other trainees, which fulfill the audiences, or the "mothers" desire to know the well-being of their children. For example, in the official episodes, the team stage performances only take up less than one third of the running time. Other spaces are given to back-stage activities of each team, such as lessons with the mentors and impressive moments of practice. There are also derivative video series that capture the trainees' life beyond practice and performance: Youth Gym series (episodes about trainees playing gym-related games), Youth Mukbang (episodes about trainees cooking and eating), Youth Dorm (episodes in which trainees share their stories at dorm), Youth VJ & Radio (episodes in which four trainees host talkshows about different topics),

Youth Party (episodes about trainees playing intricate competitive games), Practice Room B-rolls (interesting moments from trainees' practices). Through these clips, the audiences can gain insight into each trainee's health, ability, personalities, friendships, background, and values. In terms of health, the audiences can either see or hear from trainees' stories of who get hurt. For example, Yu Jingtian breaks his leg during the first public performance. Duan Xingxing has a stomachache. In terms of ability, the audiences can observe how fast the trainees learn the song and dance and if they are able to teach others. For example, Liu Jun and Liu Guanyou are said to learn the dance of YWY3's theme song in six hours. Sun Yihang and Duan Xingxing often help their team members to study and perfect their gestures. In terms of personalities, the audiences can observe whether the trainees are extroverted or introverted by how active they talk and show themselves in front of the camera, whether the trainees can comfort or take care of others. For example, Duan Xingxing makes hot water for Liu Guanyou when he catches a cold and Liu brings ginger tea for him to help with stomachache; Chang Huasen supports Sun Yinghao when the latter breaks his leg during practice. In terms of friendship, it's easy to observe the interactions between trainees at any circumstances, whether they talk to each other during games, whether they cheer for each other during the public performances, pair interviews in which trainees talk about their friends and memories. The audiences can also have a deeper understanding of the trainees' life experience and thoughts through interviews that dig into those topics.

In conclusion, YWY3 breaks the gendered positions in traditional gaze by positioning the audiences as androgynous and sexually detached parent of the trainees and by portraying the trainees as androgynous characters with romantic relationship to each other. The show liberates both the audiences and screen characters to take on non-binary gender roles.

Talent of hanging out

When idol production shows first came out in China, most scholars and critiques are skeptical about this particular way of producing stars and showing them to the public at the beginning of production process. The acceptance of trainees with little practice experiences makes viewers and scholars doubt their ability to perform as idols; they then further doubt the threshold of becoming an idol recently because it seems that in this type of shows, professions are no longer important. As long as the trainees appear on screen and are seen by a mass audience, they become famous regardless of their expertise. To sum up, most of criticism centers around that fact that idol production shows delete the requirement of professionalism from the standard of being a star, so many people would regard “idol” synonymous with “stars without professional talents”. However, idol production shows don’t downgrade the standard of being a star, they diversify it. Traditional stars might be well-known for only the mainstream talents associated with them, such as acting, singing, and dancing. New idols might be well-known for various reasons, such as appearance, personalities, the ways of talking and behaving. Idols and stars are similar in that they are both celebrities in entertainment industries. Their difference is that they prioritize different skill sets, rather than one has a stronger skill set than the other. For both idols and stars, they should have professional skills to at least perform a pleasurable stage for the audiences, and also have good off-stage characteristics. Stars prioritize professional skills while idols prioritize off-stage skills, which I call the talent of hanging out. For traditional stars, fans want to know them more after they like their professional works, such as a movie or an album. For idols, it is the other way around. Fans want to know their professional works after they like them as a person to hang out with. The show YWY3 promotes a new type of talent of idols, resists the mainstream star culture of professional training, and emphasizes on the qualities of being a good person.

The content structure and the operation of the show both prioritize talent of hanging-out over the professional talent. The content structure, including the order, proportion, and selectivity of different types of content presented in the show, indicates the importance of content and thus the importance of talent that creates such content. As for the order of content, the off-stage content is shown to the audiences before the on-stage content, leading the audiences to know the personal characteristics of the trainees before knowing their “traditional” professional skills. The first episode of the whole show is a simulated media press meeting for the trainees. Many journalists and behind-screen crew workers in the entertainment industries are invited to ask trainees questions. The questions are asked based on the trainees’ resume and interests, which does not involve any stage performance skills. By releasing the press meeting before the initial evaluation stage performance, the production crew leads the audiences to have a preconception of most of the trainees before seeing their “traditional” professional skills. The press meeting is similar to interviews and conversations, which requires the soft skill of communicating with others. The talent required in this case is not singing or dancing, but how to soften some acerbic questions, lighten the mood of the meeting, and give a smooth answer. First impression is a critical element in liking someone. Since the first exposure of the trainees are at the press meeting, knowing the trainees during their hang-out time comes before knowing the trainees on stage. The clips of daily practice and hanging out is disproportionately more than the stage performance. The clips of daily practice are more selective than stage performance.

As for the proportion of content, the majority footages of the official episodes and extra-official videos are about the trainees’ daily life and interaction, not stage performance. After the initial evaluation round, each official episode (Part I and Part II) consists of four group performances. The total screening time of the episode is about three hours each time, the actual performances takes up less than half an hour in total in each episode. The rest of the episode is

devoted to behind-stage practice or fun activities prepared for the trainees, such as Hotpot party, fashion show, and kite flying. The proportion of hang-out time to performance time is nearly 1 to 5. As the audiences watch five times as much stage performance as hang-out, they will remember the trainees' performance during the hang-out time deeper than the performance on stage. Besides the official episodes, there are several extra-official video series recording, which are daily activities that do not require stage skills but interpersonal skills. The activities are losing significance in the case of the show. The audiences are not interested in the activities but who participate. They also do not pay much attention to whether the trainees are good at that activities or not, but whether the trainees can make this process enjoyable to watch. Essentially, the professional skills related to those activities are less important than the skills to make the audiences want to keep watching the show. For example, in Youth Mukbang, though it is about cooking, the participating trainees do not need to know how to cook but how to make the cooking process interesting. The audiences are not interested in actually learning cooking skills or watching the trainees to cook professionally. They want to have a good time "hanging out" with the trainees virtually, through cooking or any other activities. The same reasoning applies to Youth Gym. The trainees do not have to know how to work out to participate in Youth Gym recording. The games played in this series are easy and do not involve professional weightlifting or other sports. The audiences do not expect to see professional match as well. They want to hang out with these trainees in the gym environment instead. Other video series—Youth VJ & Radio, Youth Chatroom, and interviews—are more obviously relying on the talent of hang-out. The essential format of these activities is talk show, which requires the talker to use verbal and body language to amuse the audiences and attract their attention. This skill only concerns how one interact with another person, not how one performs singing or dancing.

As for selectivity of the content, the selectivity of off-stage footages is higher than that of on-stage footages. For stage performance, most of the shots are wide shots that contain the whole team or majority members of the team. There is little selection of whose shots to put more for the performance part. Even when the shots switch to individual members, the time given to each member is approximately the same. There will also be a focus camera for each trainee, which captures the whole performance for that trainee only. These clips are also available after each public performance. Therefore, all the performance shots can be seen by the audiences and trainees do not need to compete for screening time during stage performance. However, the off-stage footages are highly competitive because there is a wide range of daily life footages from more than a hundred trainees and the screening time is disproportionately limited. It's impossible to give each trainee plenty of time to show themselves in each episode. As we've discussed that the hang-out footages are more important in previous points. The screening time for these footages is the battlefield that trainees compete for. In order to gain maximum exposure and larger chance to be liked by the audiences, the trainees not only need to have solid stage performance, but also the hang-out talent that makes their footage more enjoyable to watch than others'. If their footage stands out in the pile of footages, they have larger chance of standing out among other trainees and being liked by the audiences.

In addition to the content structure, the competition system of YWY3 also prioritizes the talent of hanging out over performance. The final debut members are determined by the votes from the audiences, not by the mentors' assessment or the ranking of public performances. The mentors' gaze is centered on professional performance. When they give feedbacks to the trainees' practice, they do not consider other factors such as how much time they have practiced, how they treat their team members, or how they speak to others; what they are shown is just the performance. If the competition result is based on mentors' assessment, the professional skills rank higher than other factors. However, in the audiences' perspective, the most

important parts in the show are the hang-out parts, as we've discussed. The ability to hang out with the audiences determines the audiences' preferences and thus the chance to debut.

The emphasis on talent of hanging-out is significant for two reasons. First, it is a subcultural resistance to the mainstream standard of choosing stars. Conventionally, famous stars are the representation of all kinds of "elite" qualities: good-looking with slim figure, have received systematic trainings at art schools, have establishment or connections in entertainment industry. Take some stars widely liked by the youth community as examples. Singers like TFBoys members started singing and dance training when they are in primary school. Actors such as Wu Lei, Song Zuer, are students who major in acting at the Central Academy of Drama. Ouyang Nana, a popular young actor and cellist, was born in a family with music heritage, so that she can attend world-class performances and issue albums at a young age. All of the above examples are good-looking as well. Thus, the standard of becoming a mainstream star is high excludes lots of people even if they have other admirable characteristics. Similar standard is even stricter in South Korea's music star producing process, which is developed by the S.M entertainment company. For people who intend to become a music star, they have to be signed by an agency company, go through the required training, pass the evaluation, and wait for the appropriate moment to debut as a formal music star. The process is usually long. For G-Dragon, the king of k-pop in South Korea, he spent 11 years as a trainee at the S.M and Y.G entertainment companies. The process of training is also tough, according to an autobiographic article of a former trainee Euodias. She recapitulates that everyone needs to weigh under 47kg regardless of age or height and everyone's weight is closely monitored by the staff. The staff will also recommend trainees to take plastic surgery to look better, which might increase the likelihood of debuting. Among all the trainees, only the selected slim good-looking girls can debut. This system clearly ranks professional skills and appearance over other qualities when teaching the trainees. Promoting talent of hanging-out is a resistance to these mainstream

requirements of professional talents and strict body control, opening up the floor to trainees at all skill and appearance levels. Talent of hanging-out diversifies the standard of becoming a star so that people do not have to shape themselves into the beauty and skill standards. Admittedly, professional skills and good-looking are bonus, but the trainees can be liked for more than those two reasons. They can be liked because of the way they talk or the jokes they make, because of their dramatic facial expression or body movements, because of their virtues and positive values. By diversifying the reasons to be liked, the talent of hanging-out attacks the mainstream standard of choosing stars and increases possibilities of normal people to become a star.

Second, the idolization of hanging-out talent calls on the audiences to reflect upon the qualities of being a good person versus being a good professional worker. Recently in China, the competition between peers is severe. Students compete scores and school applications with each other. Employees compete Key Performance Indicator with each other. Everyone wants to beat others in their professional fields and starts to lose their humanness. Many people sacrifice physical and mental health to improve professional capacity and many use trickeries to win others. In such aggressive period, promoting the talent of hanging-out and being a person that others want to befriend with is to redirect the off-track humanity.

In conclusion, YWY3 prioritizes the trainees' ability to hanging out with the audiences over performance talent by showing the off-stage footages before the stage footages and to a larger amount. The criterion of choosing the final debut members is also dependent on the off-stage footages. By reversing the importance of professional and hang-out skills, the show resists the mainstream standard of stars and directs the mass audiences to be a healthy and admirable before being a professional.

After the case study of YWY3, we conclude that the idol production shows break the traditional gendered spectatorship and skillset required for stars. They liberate the screen characters from being the spectacle in a sexualized perspective and provide the audiences with a wide choice of androgynous and desexualized spectatorship positions. They also encourage both the stars and audiences to possess commendable personal characteristics before drowning themselves into acquiring professional skills.

Platformization

Recently, short video platforms, such as TikTok, Kuaishou, and Xiao Hongshu, become pervasive recently. These platforms are a type of mobile device apps that display videos to users. The videos are produced by content producers registered on the platform and cover a wide range of topics. Every day, millions of videos are produced, and the platform uses special algorithms to recommend fewer videos to the users. There are several prominent features of the platforms. First, the platform doesn't produce anything and, instead, welcomes people of any background to register as content producers to create content. The platform gathers the producers so that the viewers can use this platform to search for videos they like. There are few limitations on the topics of videos, so content producers can shoot anything they want as long as they pass the censorship code. As a result, there are abundant content producers posting videos every day. The oversupply of videos leads to the second feature of platforms, the algorithms that platforms use to recommend videos to users so as not to overwhelm them. All the content produced by the producers will be pushed to a group of end-users, who are determined by the platform to be interested in the content, for the first round of feeding. The platform will record the data traffic generated by these videos and put the ones with the most data traffic on the recommendation sections and circulate them for more rounds. Data traffic, the most valuable asset in a platform, involves interactions between producers and end-users, such as views, comment, likes, and subscriptions. An even more popular content would become

a topic that people want to watch other things related to it. Therefore, a popular video on the platform not only receives likes and comments for itself, but also advertises its producers and generates further discussions based on that. In order to make their videos popular, the content producers will try different methods to “decorate” their videos, such as picking an unusual caption and a cover photo, adding elements that already have data traffic. What’s more, behind the front-end, content producers can pay the platform to generate more data traffic for their videos. The platform will circulate the video, put it on spotlight sections, or recommend it directly to users to help the video achieve a certain amount of traffic. Video platforms also initiate livestream which is becoming the most prevalent form of interactive medium. The livestream function is only open to the content producers who have obtained a certain amount of data traffic. It is usually the place where fans can communicate with their stars and get to know them outside of their works. In a virtual livestream room, fans can type on the screen or send gifts to the livestreamer, which can be seen by all the people in the room, and the livestreamer can respond to these actions.

Produce Camp 2019 works just like all the video platforms in the following ways. First, the production company of the show, Tencent Video, doesn’t have its own personnel of trainees. Rather, they invite trainees from other agency companies or individuals to participate in the show. Each participating trainee is like a content producer of the platform Produce Camp. The content they produce is the footage of themselves recorded by the cameras in the camp. In addition to cameramen who shoot the live stage performance and interactive activities, there are lots of cameras set up in different locations in the camp to capture daily life of the trainees. For example, in Dorm Diary, two trainees stand in front the camera to express themselves. There are plenty of similar cameras in other locations to capture all the angles of the dorm. The cameras are always running, which means that the platform is always there. The trainees can act however they want in front of the cameras to have their footages shot, or, in the language

of video platform, to produce their videos. Upon gathering all the footages, the production company will choose the content to be put into the final cut of the official episodes and related videos. The official videos function as the recommendation features of video platforms, in which only the content deemed by the platforms to be outstanding can be displayed. Because there are thousands of videos produced every day on a platform, it's likely that many can't be seen by the platform users. Only the videos in the recommendation section get a chance. Similarly, in Produce Camp, with more than a hundred trainees, it's unlikely that the audiences can see everyone's performance. Only the footages that are edited into the official episodes can be seen by the audiences.

Determining whose shots to be put into the official is another question for the production company, a question that any video platforms encounter as well. Similar to the algorithm used by video platforms described previously, Produce Camp also has a system of choosing shots. For the first round of episodes, the production company would choose shots on their own behalf. On one hand, they would use trainees who already have popularity or data traffic on other platforms to attract public attention as people might want to watch this show because of them. For example, Zhou Zhennan has participated in another reality show before and already has a fan base, so he appears in lots of the video captions, search list in social media, and the first round of extra activity recordings, such as the Vlog series, Dorm Diary, and Treasure of Produce Camp. He is also promoted to be the standard of an idol for the whole camp during the initial grade evaluation in the first official episode. Likewise, Xia Zhiguang, Yan Xujia, Zhao Lei, and Peng Chuyue, who have debuted in a music group X9 before, also get more exposure time than other unknown trainees. In addition to already-known trainees, the production company will also choose trainees who are less-known but they pay much attention. The standard of choosing these trainees are somehow ambiguous and complicated. Some trainees might be from influential agency companies, such as Wajijiwa or Yuanjihua. In

the debut group, half of the members are from Wajijiwa, one is from Yuanjihua. Some might be outstanding in dancing, singing, or rapping. In the debut group, Liu Ye has been practicing dance for decades and has worked as a dance teacher. Zhang Yanqi has won the champion of 8 Miles Underground, the most important rap competition among rappers. Some might be good at creating entertaining atmosphere. These trainees, sometimes are called the sons of the production company, get more exposure time and publications than others. Similarly on video platforms, content producers can pay the platforms to circulate their videos or put their videos in the top of the recommendation section. Therefore, there's room for manipulation of whose shots to be put into the episodes by the platform, i.e. the production company. After collecting shots from these trainees, the editing crew will fulfil the rest of the show with shots of whoever that create the funniest effect. After the first round, the production company can get the feedback from the audiences, i.e. the voting results and data traffic chart for the first round. Because audiences vote based on the trainees' performance in the episodes, it's equivalent to say that the audiences like the content created by a trainee and the audiences like the trainee. High votes are an indicator of how much the trainees are liked by the viewers. Thus, the voting result functions just like the algorithms other video platforms use to determine the content producers whose videos are widely liked, which includes the number of views or likes videos get. The producers will then release more shots of the trainees who have high votes. This circulation strategy works the same as the circulation algorithms of video platforms in which the popular videos are put in the recommendation section repeatedly. Looking closely at the voting rankings of each round, we can observe that after each round, the trainees who get high votes get more shots in the next round of episodes. For example, after the first round, the highest voting trainees are Zhou Zhennan, Xia Zhiguang, He Luoluo, Wang Chenyi, Liu Ye, Yan Xujia, Zhao Lei, Peng Chuyue, Zhai Xiaowen, Zhang Yanqi, Zhao Rang. In the next round, they all have more than average exposure time and chances to record extra activities.

Due to the platformization nature of the show, Produce Camp fosters three new kinds of spectatorship in the following ways. First, there is a luck spectatorship, which means there's a component of luck in determining whose shots can be seen by a mass audience. The algorithms to recommend and circulate popular videos depend on multiple factors—the content itself, the producers' existing popularity, and the producers' monetary connection with the platform. Likewise, in Produce Camp, the reasons that a trainee is liked are ambiguous and divergent. Many trainees have a good public image and behave in positive ways in the show. These two points only ensure that the trainees have created a decent content, but the popularity of their content relies on factors out of their control as well. If they are the chosen “sons” of the production company, their footages have a superior order to be shown than similar footages from other trainees. Trainees might also be known for an unintentional behavior that create a hilarious reality show effect. Moreover, there is a chance component as to whose shot the audiences want to look at. Because the running time of an official episode is two to three hours, viewers are likely to fast-forward or skip certain parts of the episode. Where the audiences stop their mouse to watch is somehow random. Because the running time is pretty long, many video producers on media platforms will synthesize different cuts of the shows as videos. Some will collect the funniest moments. Some will collect the most moving or saddest moments. Some will collect sweet interactions between trainees. These “cuts” of the official episodes are prevalent on video platforms as the official episodes if not more. Many audiences might look at the cuts first, so they only remember the trainees who are in the cuts, which are selected on a relatively random basis.

Second, exposure and attention outweigh actual content. On the platforms with numerous videos, it's usually hard for people to choose which one to watch. As for idol production shows, the long running time deters many audiences. Under this circumstance, knowing how to catch viewers' eyeballs is the way to go. Normally, content producers will

create unusual captions or to make their names appear multiple times to increase familiarity. This is also the strategy for idol production shows. Each episode has at least one eye-catching moment that can be used as a caption, such as the battle between two trainees. Within the episode, the trainees, among others who are equally pretty and capable, need to gain maximum exposure and attention from the audiences to win votes.

Last but not least, there is a natural halo associated with the screen and stage. Platforms, either the screen or the stage, function as an idol filter that direct the audiences' attention to whoever is on it. The person who's in the spotlight might not be different from the normal people in our life. As we've discussed that there's no threshold of who can be on the screen or stage, anyone, even those who don't have performance training or experiences, can become a content producer or a trainee contestant. If the trainees are just normal people like we are, why do we want to spend hours looking at their performance? I would argue that the platform is a star filter that glorifies people on it. A trainee has nothing to be looked at when he is not debut. However, the show Produce Camp can give him a reason to be looked at. Once he appears on the screen or performs on the stage, he has everyone's eyes on him. It is this stage effect that makes him a spectacle and thus a star. Every day, we pass by different people, but we don't pay much attention to them. On the contrary, when we see a screen or stage, we want to look at who's on it because we associate these platforms with a halo and deem that it is worth looking.

Political simulation

Politics is a sensitive topic to be avoided in media production in China. For idol production shows, they also eliminate any discussion on political issues in the show, such as the political system, party affiliation, foreign policies. In the case of Produce Camp 2019, even though the production crews of these shows exclude explicit political content in the shows, they could not

conceal the fact that the shows themselves are simulations of democratic election and neoliberal socioeconomic system in real life.

Democratic Election

The show imitates democratic election process because of the trainee-fan relationships and the competition system. The trainee-fan relationship parallels to leader-follower relationship. Both relationships are representative and mutually dependent. As political leaders represent the interests of their followers, the trainees represent the desires of their fans. While political leaders promise their followers to carry out solution items after being elected, the trainees promise their fans to expose themselves in public after being debuted. The competition system also parallels to direct democratic election process. According to the Oxford encyclopedia, democracy is the form of government in which people have the authority to choose their governing representatives. Everyone in the nation who are above the legal age can vote for any candidate they like. As in idol production shows, the audiences have the authority to choose the idols to debut. Everyone with a Tencent account can vote for eleven trainees every day. This voting is free and available for anyone who wants to be a part of the voting process. The weight of individual's vote is not equivalent. Voters who put more money into the process have more weight in shaping the results. As for the show, VIP account holders have a second ballot to vote, so they can give two votes to one trainee every day. In addition to buy VIP accounts, the audiences can buy the sponsors' products, which is the Xiao Manyao yogurt, to get more voting ballots. Therefore, the amount of investment is in proportion to the weight in decision-making. Third, the political candidates use different exposure resources to express themselves and attract votes, such as media press, interview, public interaction with the voters. As for the show, the trainees also need to manipulate these resources to appeal to the voting audiences. In addition to appearing in the official episodes, they can also participate in B-roll activities, such as games, interviews, livestream, search chart on social media platforms. These opportunities

let them show more of their background, personalities, interest, and values by reacting to different situations and answering questions.

Neoliberal Lesson

Neoliberalism arose in the Reagan-Bush years as an economic belief held by economists like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Neoliberal economists root for radically free market and little government intervention. This school of thoughts prioritizes economic growth in the social development. In addition to changing economic policies of tariff, welfare, and market regulations, neoliberal ideas have disseminated into other aspects of the society, especially politics and culture. As Wendy Brown summarized in her essay, neoliberalism has become an ideology that pervades individual lives. The priority of profit turns citizens into rational and entrepreneurial objects who maximize self-interests to gain economic success. Further, neoliberalism is almost equivalent to responsibility of self-care and effort. In Brown's words, "the model neoliberal citizen is one who strategizes for her or himself among various social, political, and economics options, not one who strives with others or alter or organize these options." It emphasizes the importance of self-motivation and action to succeed in a given environment instead of changing that environment. Thus, neoliberalism urges individuals to be responsible for their own well-being and success and behave in such ways that maximizes their interests. While accounting for self-responsibility is a motivational, the focus on individual effort and ability would shift away people's attention of the flaws in any structural system. The beneficiaries of existing social or political systems can use neoliberal ideas to justify the system and blame the failure of people to their own wrongdoings. This ideology of living and surviving is analogical to the way of surviving in Produce Camp. Although idol production shows are aiming for entertainment, they actually can be seen as a lesson of being a neoliberal object in this world. The way they live and survive in the competition show parallels to the situation of normal people living in this real world. The strategies of trainees are lessons of how to become

a neoliberal object while the strategies of the production company can be seen as a justification of the flawed idol production system.

First, the idol production show system is analogous to the real-world socioeconomic system, which internally has equality and fairness issues. In the real world, the mainstream value is to reach the upper status in wealth or social influence. In the idol production shows, the mainstream value is to reach the debut positions. Just like the real-world system, the idol production shows have concerns of inequity in two ways, the playfield and treatment. On one hand, the playfield is uneven for trainees just like it is uneven in reality. As people born in different families, they are inherited with different appearance, personality, and access to education. Likewise, the trainees come from divergent backgrounds and skill levels. Some trainees might have been practicing dances, songs, and rap for several years, such as Xia Zhiguang and Zhao Rang. Some might, like Zhai Xiaowen, might just learn them. Some trainees might have been on shows or audiovisual works before, so they already have a fan base. Examples include Zhou Zhennan and He Luoluo, who have been on Son of the Future and Yi An Music group. Yan Xujia, Xia Zhiguang, and Zhao Lei have been in a music group before. Some trainees are from big agency companies, such as Wajijiwa and Yue Hua. Some are from agency companies that are just founded or are little-known. The producers of the show will pick trainees who already have public attention and fans to publicize the show at the beginning, which means some people have far greater advantages than others from the beginning of the shows, either in background (agency company), talent, and appearance.

Not only does the entry point is unequal in the show, the treatment each trainee gets varies, which can lead to divergent final results. As discussed in the previous chapter, there are chosen trainees whose shots will be exposed more in the official episodes. The production company has certain people in mind that they want to create a positive image for. At the same time, some trainees will be downplayed to accentuate the qualities of those trainees. For example, in the

evaluation stage in the first episode, Ren Hao doesn't perform well in the evaluation performance and asks for an additional performance chance. He reasons that there are times people don't play well and there are chances in the future for them to play better, which is harshly criticized by the mentors. Su Youpeng tells him that the chances are limited in the entertainment industry and no one is guaranteed to have another one, so they need to cherish every performance chance given to them and do their best each time. This clip, especially positioned in the initial episode, can impair this trainee's image. It's natural to have a preoccupied impression of him being easy on himself and not caring enough about the stage performance. In addition to him, the performance of some unprofessional trainees is officially criticized by the subtitles. On the contrary, the production crew would put the complementary from mentors for the chosen trainees into the episode. There are high possibilities that the production crew chooses not to put good shots of trainees because they are not the chosen ones. The crew also choose to just put good or bad shots of certain trainees to their own purpose of promoting someone or downgrading someone.

In order to justify the fundamentally unjustified system, the production company uses neoliberal ideas to cover the hidden unfairness in the system. Even though many structural factors determine whether a trainee can debut—such as fans' preferences, the agency company's resources, the production company's preferences, and even luck—the production company can disguise these factors and make effort the main driving force. In the official episodes, the audiences only see the performance of the trainee themselves, not their backgrounds. The audiences don't know the deals between the production company and their agency companies. The audiences also don't know the voting behaviors of fan groups of each trainee. Some trainees' fans might have more spare time or money than others' fans, so they can thus invest more into supporting their favorite trainees. Factors like these are not reflected in the show. Instead, we only see the trainees and will thus relate only their behaviors with the

votes they get. If we see shots of a trainee practicing in the classroom, we would associate him with hardworking. If he ranks high, we would naturally think that it is his hard work that makes him popular. If we see shots of a trainee comforting or taking care of other trainees, we would associate him with considerate. If he ranks high, we would naturally think that it is his warm-heartedness and empathy that makes him popular. The same reasoning applies to other good qualities a person can have. Thus, the production company can use this strategy to conceal the influence of external factors of a trainee's popularity and emphasize on internal characteristics. They can select certain kinds of shots to create a personality for a trainee and justify the trainee's success through that personality he has.

Qinyi Liu

References

- HUI FAYE XIAO. "Androgynous Beauty, Virtual Sisterhood: Stardom, Fandom, and Chinese Talent Shows Under Globalization." *Super Girls, Gangstas, Freeters, and Xenomaniacs*. Syracuse University Press, 2012. 104–. Print.
- Fairchild, Charles. "Building the Authentic Celebrity: The 'Idol' Phenomenon in the Attention Economy." *Popular music and society* 30.3 (2007): 355–375. Web.
- Doane, M.. "The Moving Image: Pathos and the Maternal." (1987).
- Fung, Anthony YH. "Fandomization of Online Video or Television in China." *Media, culture & society* 41.7 (2019): 995–1010. Web.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures* / by Laura Mulvey. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989. Print.
- Xu, Deya, and Lei Guo. "Use and Gratifications of Singing Competition Reality Shows: Linking Narcissism and Gratifications Sought with the Multimedia Viewing of Chinese Audiences." *Mass communication & society* 21.2 (2018): 198–224. Web.
- Zhang, Chunyu. "Loving Boys Twice as Much: Chinese Women's Paradoxical Fandom of 'Boys' Love' Fiction." *Women's studies in communication* 39.3 (2016): 249–267. Web.
- 郭雨宁. "从亚文化角度看'土味情话'的产生与发展." *西部广播电视* 9 (2019): 14–16. Print.
- Brown, Wendy. "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy." *Theory & Event*, vol. 7 no. 1, 2003. *Project MUSE*.
- HUI FAYE XIAO. "Androgynous Beauty, Virtual Sisterhood: Stardom, Fandom, and Chinese Talent Shows Under Globalization." *Super Girls, Gangstas, Freeters, and Xenomaniacs*. Syracuse University Press, 2012. 104–. Print.
- Xu, Deya, and Lei Guo. "Use and Gratifications of Singing Competition Reality Shows: Linking Narcissism and Gratifications Sought with the Multimedia Viewing of Chinese Audiences." *Mass communication & society* 21.2 (2018): 198–224. Web.
- Lin, Jian, and Jeroen de Kloet. "Platformization of the Unlikely Creative Class: Kuaishou and Chinese Digital Cultural Production." *Social media + society* 5.4 (2019): 205630511988343–. Web.
- Zhang, Zongyi. "Infrastructuralization of Tik Tok: Transformation, Power Relationships, and Platformization of Video Entertainment in China." *Media, culture & society* 43.2 (2021): 219–236. Web.