

Investigating Chinese Showbusiness Masculinity in Web 2.0 Environment

A Comparative Analysis of Two Male-Centered Variety Shows

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ABSTRACT

The recent Chinese variety show *Youth with You Season 3* has stirred up fierce discussions about the state of Chinese traditional hegemonic masculinity domestically due to the androgynous male images that several idols in the show display. Given the context of Web 2.0, this study therefore aims to explore the representation trend of Chinese masculinity in show business and what role Web 2.0 plays in this seemingly changing process. We made a comparative analysis of Chinese male idols respectively from Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 talent shows based on 4 major observing aspects, including costume and makeup, on-stage performances, bearing and behavior off stage, and language expression. Findings from our analysis reveal that Chinese masculinity in the entertainment industry tends to turn 'soft' or 'metrosexual'. Yet, the revamped masculinity still exhibits essential characteristics of traditional male ideologies. The study further underscores that the emergence of the soft male ideal in Chinese show business can be attributed to the increasingly diversified means of communication and growing influence of female and younger groups in the Web 2.0 era.

Keywords: Chinese masculinity, show business, Web 2.0

1. INTRODUCTION

Gaining a huge momentum from its previously released seasons, the 2021 talent show, *Youth with You Season 3* (青春有你) has gone viral on the Internet since its high-profile and eye-catching debut. However, this show has received rather polarized comments, among which the most heated debates mainly center the diversified male idols and their androgynous image portrayals. Traditionally, the definition of masculinity concerning *Wen* (scholarly or artistically extraordinary, 文) and *Wu* (physically tough, 武) [1] has dominated the academic, cultural discourse in China. Similarly, the hegemonic masculinity propounded by R. W. Connell [2] seems to have been the orthodox and widely acknowledged type in China. Yet, in the contemporary era, public aesthetic preference for alpha males seemingly has diverted to those with hybrid masculinity

[3], especially on the variety shows presented in cyberspace.

Then, has the intrinsic meaning and explicit presentation of Chinese masculinity in show business indeed changed over the few decades? Against the context of Web 2.0, this study also tends to answer whether cyberspace plays a role in reshaping Chinese masculinity by contrasting two renowned shows released respectively from Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 entertainment industry, *Super Boy 2007* (快乐男声) and *Youth with You Season 3*.

The paper unfolds as follows. Section 2 attempts to compare Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 and generalize the core characteristics of the two. This section also overviews previous studies in relation to the likely transformation of male images and some important influences of Web 2.0. Section 3 articulates the method applied in this paper,

which is a comparative case study. Section 4 presents an elaborate analysis of selected cases following the given method. Section 5 concludes and brings insights into the role of Web 2.0.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Web 1.0 versus Web 2.0*

In light of previous studies, we abstract core characteristics of Web 2.0 and Web 1.0 in this part. Web 2.0 can be characterized by a many-to-many form of communication [4]. Unlike Web 1.0, which focused on the one-directional spreading of information from one central source to many different receivers [5], *Web 2.0* enables the active participation of many more users, leading to the crowd's collective wisdom [6]. In Web 2.0, users no longer use the web to obtain information but instead create information and share it with others using Web 2.0 technologies [7]. Web 2.0 tools are quickly becoming common to adopt a new way for communication and interaction, ranging from popular Wikis, Blogs, Podcast to Chinese social networking tools Bilibili, Weibo, and TikTok.

2.2. *Masculinity and Web 2.0*

Hundreds of articles have zeroed in on diversified models and exemplars of masculine ideals, but most studies have a long period and do not merely focus on China. For example, William Moss [8] focuses on some key theoretical concepts used to frame and explain American and Canadian men's masculinity. Kam Loutie [9] illuminates the specificities of East Asian masculinities in global contexts and questioned some of the assumptions of Euro-American theorizing on masculinities. Kenneth MacKinnon [10] attempts to chart American and British masculinity representation in popular culture from the 1980s onwards. These studies give profound insights into how male images of different regions are presented or transform over time through multi-dimensional analyses.

Some articles deal specifically with the important applications of Web 2.0, while they highlight the influences of Web 2.0 in a boarder and practical sense, few of which have probed into its impact on intangible and non-material dimensions of human beings. For instance, Web 2.0 in education [6, 11, 12], Web 2.0 in business [13-15], Web 2.0 in governance [16-18], etc.

As mentioned above, despite the plethora of research on the topic of male images and Web 2.0 social networking, very few studies have examined the two dimensions together and investigated the impact of Web 2.0 on male identities. Some studies do explore male identities under the circumstance of Web 2.0 while putting more emphasis on binary gender relations or gender issues. Such as gender trouble in Web 2.0 [19],

self-presentations and gender divide in Web 2.0 [20, 21], investigations into gender differences in the acceptance of online social networks [22, 23]. A noteworthy study that has examined male presentation in Web 2.0 is that by Katharine Joo [24], who gives several ways amateur DJs express masculinity in Web 2.0. Nevertheless, Joo compares the expression of masculinity with female DJs in the essay and argues that although females constitute a large majority of students at DJ academies, most 'bedroom DJs' are demonstrably males, especially in Web 2.0 environments such as YouTube. As reviewed, the specific mechanisms relating Web 2.0 to masculinity are still mostly murky, with few general conclusions.

In general, an evident lack of studies has examined the correlation between Web 2.0 and the presentation of masculinity in show business in contemporary China. Moreover, whether Chinese males' performing styles have changed over the past ten years remains a research question. This study therefore aims to investigate the above questions through a comparative analysis of Chinese male idols respectively from Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 entertainment industry.

3. METHOD

The following two male-centered talent shows are analysed with a particular focus on sequences where masculinities of players display: *Youth with You Season 3* and *Super Boy 2007*. The two shows were chosen for their contribution to the exclusion of unnecessary disruptive factors. In other words, there were significant similarities between the two shows, including the participants, genera, and influence. The participants are all young boys aging from 18 to 23. In the two shows, they are coached by professional trainers in various artistic disciplines and perform on the stage almost once a week, singing or dancing as they have prepared during the previous week. Based on the judges' verdicts and viewers' voting, some weaker contestants would be eliminated, and eventually, there will be extraordinary winners of the competition. In addition, both of the shows have gained immense popularity in China since they aired, serving as desirable materials to the measurement of Chinese masculine ideals. The major dissimilarity of the two shows lies in the fact that one is a commercial product belonging to Web 1.0 while another has stepped into the age of Web 2.0. When *Super Boy* was released, China remained in the era of Web 1.0 with Internet users of 162 million, while in today's Web 2.0 age, the number of Internet users in China has reached around 940 million by January 2021, accounting for one-fifth of the world's total [25]. Hence, 'Web 2.0' becomes the control variable in the content analysis.

To discuss the trend of masculinity with a higher degree of pertinence, we choose 8 highly popular male idols with varying personalities as our research sample: Liang Sen, Tang Jiuzhou, Deng Xiaoci, and Sun Yinghao

from *Youth with You Season 3* and Su Xing, Wei Chen, Zhang Jie, Chen Chusheng from *Super Boy 2007*. We will examine 4 main observing dimensions to account for the trend of masculinity for this qualitative content

analysis: performers' (1) costume and makeup; (2) on-stage performances; (3) bearing and behavior off stage; and (4) language expression. As exemplified by **Table 1**:

Table.1 Description of male images

Indicator Name	Costume and makeup	On-stage performances	Bearing and behavior off stage	Language expression
Liang Sen (<i>Youth with You Season 3</i>)	Tight uniform; pearl necklace; Heavy makeup; glittering facial adornments	Smooth movement of limbs and neck; Latin dance; adorable wink; flirty facial expression	Physically powerful posture; self-confidence; emotional fragility	Emphasis on brotherhood; brisk and non-hesitant language expression; responsible characteristic
Su Xing (<i>Super Boy 2007</i>)	White swallow-tailed vest; dark blue shirt; decorated tie; side bang; little makeup	Hand waving; hopping	Bro-hugging; clenching hand; occasional crying	Hot-blooded words; full of responsibility

Also, the evaluation of the four dimensions involves all episodes from the two shows.

4. COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS: MASCULINITY IN TWO SHOWS

4.1. Costume and makeup

Super Boy 2007 has a more casual style of costumes on most stages, which embodies the traditional culturally-celebrated masculinity. Preliminaries and breakouts witness various clothing choices, ranging from casual hip-hop hoodies to formal traditional Chinese gowns. When the contest proceeds into the final, the plain everyday look is replaced by a specially designed onstage garment of voguish cut. The most preferred outfits are overturn-collared shirts, suits, tuxes, uniforms, slacks, and jeans, the menswear mainstay that never grows old. In the final (Episode 26, Part 1; 2007-07-06), Su Xing is perfectly groomed in a white swallow-tailed vest outside the dark blue shirt paired with a pinstriped black and white cravat. Wei Chen chooses a solemn red tux. There are six yellow knots on the chest and trimmed golden stripes on each arm. Chen Chusheng appears on the stage in a navy-blue silk shirt with light texture, lined with a gray shirt. As for Zhang Jie, he is in a black vest with silver glitters on waist-welt pockets. In the second-round performance, four singers all change into suit coats and jeans. The costumes are in tune with the public aesthetics of dominant masculinity. The overall angular clean-cut clothing contributes to the shaping of mighty and physically sturdy male images. The accessories such as metal nameplate necklace (Su Xing; Chen Chusheng), Buddhistic bead bracelet (Chen Chusheng), metal wristband (Su Xing; Chen Chusheng; Wei Chen), decorated ties (Su Xing; Wei Chen), and crocheted sports mittens (Zhang Jie) also add to the aura of male glamour.

In contrast, the holistic costume has not run athwart what previously perceived masculinity in the current smash hit. However, it may be demolished by a

combination of elements. A chic uniform with a girdling-waist design is a common performing clothing type on stage that emanates the charming beauty of body curves but appears less masculine (Liang Sen; Sun Yinghao; Deng Xiaoci). Despite a recent boom in purchases among men, pearl necklaces are still not widely acknowledged as symbols of manhood. Yet pearl can be frequently seen on stage (Liang Sen; Tang Jiuzhou). Moreover, the edge of the costumes is tailored to be rounded into Peter Pan collars, coupled with lace cuffs as an ornament, which is in vogue among female consumers (Deng Xiaoci). Some sleeves are made into a black-silk fishnet shape which endows the male idol a feminine-prone temperament (Sun Yinghao). The skintight jeans also present de-gendering attributes (Liang Sen; Sun Yinghao; Tang Jiuzhou).

Makeups on variety shows have also transformed over the years. Participants share similar hairstyles, side bangs (Su Xing; Wei Chen; Zhang Jie), sculpted into a flippy shape on the top of the head (Su Xing; Wei Chen; Chen Chusheng; Zhang Jie). Wearing little or even no makeup, the participants from *Super Boy 2007* present the most original and austere self. Some of the simplest embellishment is applied, such as the double eyelid tape (Wei Chen) and polished eyebrows. The usual glasses may also be removed (Su Xing).

In the diametrical counterpoint, *Youth with You* resembles a heterogeneous exhibition of hybrid masculinity. Hairstyles vary greatly except Liang Sen; he is bald. Long hair hides the specific symbol of the male gender (Sun Yinghao). Others may dye or perm their hair (Tang Jiuzhou; Deng Xiaoci). They may change to different hairstyles from time to time. Idols prepare the base with a foundation to ensure flawless and smooth skin. They radiate through the screen with heavy makeups, from saturated splashes of eyeshadow to stretched exaggerating eyeliner and to bright red lipstick. Rosy cheeks, watery eyes, cheery lips, and well-placed

facial glittering adornments unleash stunning charm and shake the binary stereotype of gender narratives.

4.2. On-stage performances

In *Youth with You Season 3*, dance movements performed by boys are more sophisticated and delicately designed than those on the *Super Boy 2007* stage. Specifically, idols from *Youth with You* focus on moving their key body parts, including chest, arms, hip, and knees, to execute eye-catching dance moves, like body waves and chest isolations. In the show, Tang Jiuzhou exudes his onstage sexiness mainly through gentle arm moves, hip shakes, waist twisting, and bending. Sun Yinghao prefers hard-hitting movements that engage the body's core muscles, and a fast, powerful dance characterizes his debut. Liang Sen could switch his idol persona from stone-cold man to vivacious natural boy, while almost all of his dancing highlights smooth movements of limbs and the neck. Deng Xiaoci masters exquisite finger gestures for his dance, matching well with his long limbs and feline-like feature.

By contrast, in *Super Boy*, idols are inclined to capture the audience's eyes through simple but highly interactive gestures like hands waving, hopping, or turning the microphone towards the audience. Zhang Jie and Su Xing are among the typical examples: they wave hands in many performances, such as in songs *Seven Days* (Zhang Jie), *Heal the World* (Zhang Jie), *Supreme* (Su Xing), *Fly without Wind* (Su Xing), *All the Way* (Su Xing), etc. While some extraordinary contestants could also dance skillfully and delicately, their professionalism and control of the stage fail to match the winners of *Youth with You Season 3*. For instance, Zhang Jie and Liang Sen performed Latin dance on the stage, but the former prioritized pace and range of actions. At the same time, the latter turned his movements into meaningful and passionate love stories, reaching harmonious visual and aesthetic effects.

Moreover, participants from *Youth 3* can mix the dance moves with targeted facial expressions to fully display their charisma. For example, in the performances, they give the audience an array of coy smirks (Tang Jiuzhou; Sun Yinghao), winks (Deng Xiaoci; Liang Sen), sweet smiles (Tang Jiuzhou; Liang Sen; Deng Xiaoci; Sun Yinghao), flirty expressions (Liang Sen; Sun Yinghao), or even lip-licking (Sun Yinghao). On the other hand, *Super Boy* contestants seemingly prefer to impress the audience through oral words, such as 'Let me hear your screams' by Wei Chen and 'Put your hands up' by Su Xing. In addition, they convey emotions and make the audience involved by direct eye contact and gorgeous smiles, which are also kind of facial expressions yet with less technique. For example, Chen Chusheng, fond of love songs, always looks at the audience affectionately when singing.

In general, the dance moves of idols from *Super Boy* are relatively repetitive and powerful, while those of *Youth 3* are either soft dances with nuanced variations or explosive dance movements. In this regard, the male images seem not to shift from hegemonic masculinity to soft one but barely represent different patterns. When considering facial expressions, the flirty lip-licking and adorable winks by *Youth 3* participants indeed fall into the category of androgynous expressions, in part unfolding a potential trend towards soft masculinity.

4.3. Bearing and behavior off stage

The concept "offstage" is defined as the state of the idols from the moment when they are detached from onstage performing. On the stage, feelings of uneasiness and shyness may surge. It is when they are separated from their professional identities that the authentic selves unveil. We have examined the cinematic texts in both shows from the aspect of bearing and behaviors offstage, including the intercuts of everyday life, practicing period, interviews on and off the stage, interactions with other participants, and body gestures during performance breaks, in an attempt to discover the homogeneity as well as the heterogeneity of masculine portrayal therein.

Super Boy concentrates mostly on the onstage performances, and there are comparatively fewer presented offstage scenes. The shown postures and gestures project an assertive male figure. For instance, Su Xing has his cool signature moves, beating his chest twice and raise his hand into the air. Most signers stand with legs apart, no less than a shoulder's length (Su Xing; Zhang Jie; Chen Chusheng), while Wei Chen seems shyer and more tentative. The interactions among singers mainly include bro-hugging (Su Xing; Zhang Jie; Chen Chusheng; Wei Chen), clenching hands (Su Xing; Zhang Jie; Chen Chusheng; Wei Chen), hitting forearms (Su Xing; Zhang Jie; Chen Chusheng; Wei Chen), and draping arms over others' shoulders (Su Xing; Zhang Jie). Along with the visual and auditory feast, added the hormonal attractiveness, they cast an enchanting spell on the audiences' hearts.

The stars in *Youth with You* presents less gender-typical qualities. Some stand with legs together, mostly hands folded at the front (Deng Xiaoci). Some with legs apart but within a narrow width (Sun Yinghao; Tang Jiuzhou); while some, however, stand in a firm posture, with legs apart and head held high during interviews (Liang Sen), manhood sparkles from inside out. When talking about something intriguing, it usually stirs uproars of laughter. Faced situations like this, some participants tend to smile bashfully while covering their mouth with one hand out of habit (Deng Xiaoci; Tang Jiuzhou).

Except for postures and gestures discussed above, the idols still maintain a traditional masculine demeanor

generally. Liang Sen is a typical example, the walking hormone. He reveals his physical strength consciously by lifting some of his fellow teammates and winning the tug-of-war in great ease, which shapes a physically powerful image. In most cases, he also reacts and replies briskly and unequivocally without the slightest hesitation. As the unanimously voted leader multiple times, his eyes gleamed in confidence, gaining absolute control of any given situation. There are also moments of weakness when he lays his head on a friend and behaves adorably. Besides, Deng Xiaoci remains emotionally stable throughout the contest. He acts extremely calm in the ghost house. He poses a frosty face and seldom reacts to the performances by other idols. But feminized qualities can also be observed when he is caught powdering his face in the audience area by the camera.

Although audiences may have seen participants welled up with tears slightly more often in *Youth with You*, both shows present filmed shots of occasional emotional outbursts due to various reasons (Su Xing; Zhang Jie; Chen Chusheng; Wei Chen; Sun Yinghao; Liang Sen; Deng Xiaoci; Tang Jiuzhou). To some extent, tears symbolize emotional fragility, which has been regarded as the antithesis of traditional masculinity. In *Super Boy*, singers thrive on holding back tears and pretend to be fine (Su Xing) or turn around to avoid direct exposure to cameras (Su Xing; Yu Haoming; Ji Jie). As can be seen from these shows, the past decade has witnessed incremental crying scenes where idols do not intentionally avoid cameras and try to hide their feelings. Society has become more tolerant towards the public expression weakness of men.

Thus, in this dimension, considering a combination of different factors mentioned above, participants from both shows mirror the mingling of feminine and masculine temperament. Also, we can conclude that the audience nowadays embraces the presentation of hybrid masculinity.

4.4. Language expression

In traditional Chinese discourse, *Yiqi* (义气) is highly emphasized. It can be roughly understood as the brotherhood and fraternity shared mostly among male groups [25]. Another traditional Chinese masculinity ideal manifests particular male features of martial valor and prowess [1]. In our analysis, both the masculine qualities of *Yiqi* and *Wu* are highlighted in the words of participants from *Super Boy 2007*. For instance, in the final episode of *Super Boy*, Su Xing comments below, "I am honored to fight with Chen Chusheng till the end. I wish I could reach the peak with my supporters." In the above statement, Su emphasizes the friendship with his opponent Chen Chusheng. Also, he phrases the competition as an assumptive battle, in which he has to 'fight'.

Similar traits can be seen in the *Youth with You Season 3*. Sun Yinghao says in a woeful tone and bursts into tears, "When will they (defeated contestants) come back?" He cannot conceal feelings of deep sorrow and the fact that he misses the eliminated friends. In resemblance to Sun, Liang Sen appreciates the value of the bonds of all the participants. He comments on his feelings during a dinner, "I think there is nothing unhappy today. When together, we blaze like a bunch of fire; when scattered, we shine like thousands of stars." He also describes the antiphonal singing training session in a military expression, "I think you have launched strikes to me at first, and I should take defensive actions."

Additionally, the traditional social discipline has defined the ideal men as 'able responsible, first and foremost shouldering responsibilities within the kin group, and then to society and the country [26]. According to the definition, a real man has the characteristics of being responsible; he is expected to have the ability to support his family and be brave enough to carry the burden.

In the show *Super Boy 2007*, all the selected members hold moral values of being 'able responsible: Su Xing says in Episode 5, "I think I can share the honor with my mother, but pressure and responsibility are on my shoulder"; Zhang Jie expresses his wish to be the breadwinner of the family; Chen Chusheng apologizes for malfunctions of auditory devices during an off-site concert, "I felt really sorry that my fans were waiting for such a long time"; when the instructor criticizes Wei Chen for singing out of tune, instead of blaming the officials and earphones, he owes the failure of performance all to himself and says sorry.

On the other hand, in the *Youth with You Season 3*, some idols show a hesitant attitude towards leadership and responsibility. In Episode 17, after being promoted as team leader, Deng Xiaoci says, "Actually, I am more of a 'free-range' captain. I think it'll be fine if everyone is self-reliant." Those words indicate that Deng has a strong individualistic tendency and resists to shoulder responsibilities as the leader. However, not all the participants behave like this. Liang Sen and Sun Yinghao accept the leader's mission immediately and say "okay" in a firm and non-hesitant way. Especially, Liang uses sentences like "I carry the hope of my team" and fights to get the favored performing song for his team in the competition; when Sun corrects the movements of other participants, he uses imperative expressions like "Come on", "You two go first", "Once again" and so forth. Tang Jiuzhou, not a leader, also facilitates the practicing process and says, "Let's think about how to solve this issue together."

From the above perspective, the intrinsic masculine qualities that fit the social expectation of the males have not faded over the years in China. Men are still apt to highlight the ties and attachment among friends, which is

reflected in language expressions on both shows. The idea that males should be responsible is embedded in Chinese culture, constraining and shaping men's behavior and the choice of words.

5. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

The present study compared the male images of key contestants from two variety shows—*Youth with You Season 3* and *Super Boy 2007* and examined the potential change of Chinese masculine ideals within the entertainment industry context. Our findings underscore that the explicit representation of Chinese masculinity has departed subtly from traditional norms and tends to become more 'soft' or 'metrosexual', as features in *Youth with You Season 3* idols: fancy clothing type, feminine-prone accessories, pretty hairstyles, and glittering makeups, less gender-typical gestures and postures, girly facial expressions, and lachrymose characteristics. Yet, the revamped masculinity still exhibits intrinsic characteristics of traditional *Wu* or hegemonic gender ideologies, exemplified by similar forms of intimate brotherhood, martial valor, 'able responsible' moral values, masculine demeanor and hard-hitting dance movements in both cases.

Findings from our analysis also help to understand the profound impact of Web 2.0 on Chinese popular culture masculinity. Today's huge online community enables people, especially the younger generation, to follow the latest global trends and interact with each other immediately and simultaneously with the help of Web 2.0 technological tools. Thus, the emergence of the 'soft' male ideal in Chinese show business like *Youth with You* can be attributed to the increasingly diversified means of communication in Web 2.0. Because younger groups can disseminate their perceptions of sexual desirability ('soft' masculinity) actively and interactively. During this process, females or female customers constitute an irresistible force. According to Kam Loutie [27], young Asian females have originally preferred 'beautiful men'. He used many well-known male models in East Asia to illustrate his argument, ranging from Japanese herbivorous men (gentle, quiet, and soft), *Otomen* (girly men), Korean icon Tsuyoshi Kusanagi (boyish-looking singer) to Chinese Pink Boy (pretty boys). Hence, in Web 2.0 environment, the young men in talent shows may at first appear to be passive players. Still, they can also be seen as active agents who must find ways to redefine masculinity to fulfill the female audience's taste [28], like idols in *Youth with You, Season 3* (the variety show was created for female viewers and having more than half of women audience).

Despite this study's contributions to examining the changing notions of Chinese showbusiness masculinity, it is not without limitations. The study was completed on a small sample. Hence the result may not be generalized

or suggest a genuine trend towards 'soft' masculinity. Furthermore, the competition systems set by two programmes are more or less different, resulting in latent analytical errors.

To conclude, the emergence of 'softer' masculinity in the Chinese entertainment industry coincides with and is under the certain influence of the advent of Web 2.0, when people, especially women and the young, have access to more effective means to convey their notions of male ideals. Additionally, the newly restructured masculinity also encompasses traditional intrinsic values, probably because traditional masculinity still plays a pivotal role in Chinese male image presentation and will not easily be substituted by new commercial elements.

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