

# "Super Girl" Gives China a Taste of Democracy

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The Mongolian Cow Sour Yoghurt Super Girl Contest, more commonly known as "Super Girl", has taken China by storm, whipping up phenomenal interest by allowing the public to vote for contestants using text messaging in the same style as Western shows like "Pop Idol".



The final of the talent contest, branded by critics at the national broadcast company CCTV as "vulgar, boorish and lacking in social responsibility", was watched by more than 400 million viewers. To put that into perspective: "American Idol" and "Indian Idol" were watched by 48 million viewers each, the sensational UK Pop Idol final attracted a mere 12 million viewers.

120,000 aspiring pop stars were finally beaten by Li Yuchun, 21, in a finale that included Communist hymns and folk songs. On the day of the final the sina.com website alone saw 2.4 million postings about the contest. Some shopping centres drafted in security guards to control disorderly Super Girl fans carrying posters and canvassing for their favourites. Fans massed on the streets of Beijing and other cities. In the Hunan capital, Changsha, thousands celebrated on the streets until dawn. Within the media industry it was noted that sales of newspapers with good Super Girl stories outstripped those without them. It was even rumoured that performance-related pay for journalists hinged on the quality of their Super Girl stories. But most importantly the public voted with text messages. Li narrowly beat Shou Bichang with 3.5 million text message votes against Shou's 3.2 million, despite being considered vocally inferior.

Commentators, from bloggers to intellectuals, sped to reflect on the implications for democracy that this television show might have. Is this the shape of things to come, a rehearsal for real suffrage? Most concluded that this is simply entertainment. But many thought that this is one example of media paving the way for changes in government, increasing popular participation, increasing popular influence, and that this is leading to greater accountability in government.

Others made commentaries on the limitations of this form of democracy. Many were shocked that the usual price of ten cents for a text message was raised to one Yuan for Super Girls— excluding the poor from the ballot box of entertainment. 'A person cannot be stripped of the right to vote on account of poverty' wrote Xu Jilin in Boxun

EastSouthWestNorth reflecting on how representative the vote was of people's opinion, asked readers to "remember that about 1 billion Chinese people do not have mobile phones".

The China Daily expresses a deeper, and widely held, misgiving about the referendum: "How come an imitation of a democratic system ends up selecting the singer who has the least ability to carry a tune?" Super Girl has teased out one uncomfortable truth about democratic processes and media – it isn't always the most worthy contestant that wins.