'Super Girl' introduces Chinese to voting

The ripples caused by "Super Girl," the most successful Chinese TV show in history, could transform China's media landscape, dominated by a heavy-handed national broadcaster and the Communist party. The reality show was created by Hunan Satellite Television in western China, rather than state-run China Central TV in Beijing, and the winner was Li Yuchun, a 21-year-old tomboy from Sichuan. "Mongolian Cow Sour Yogurt Super Girl Contest," as the program is formally called, was seen by up to 400 million Chinese, and thousands of blogs and chat rooms have sprung up online around it.

Rumors have circulated that CCTV might use its influence with China's broadcast authorities to prevent Hunan from developing a third season of the show or even force it off the local cable stations that distribute "Super Girl." Industry executives say that's unlikely to happen, because the show is so popular and the government sees value in balancing CCTV's power with other homegrown media operators such as Hunan Satellite TV and Shanghai Media Group.

But nervous authorities are likely to dictate a few changes in the show's structure for another reason: It has given Chinese a chance to vote for the first time, perhaps setting a dangerous precedent. Inspired by grass-roots campaigns for the top contestants, more than 8 million Chinese paid about 2¢, a sizable amount in local terms, to send a text message by mobile phone in support of one of the three Super Girl finalists.

"The show may be less voter-oriented in the future," said Quinn Taw, managing partner in China for MindShare and Maxus, Beijing. "But even if they tone down that element, the show will not disappear. It's a hot property."
The sponsor, Mongolia-based Mengniu Dairy, and its agency, local shop Apex, Chengdu, used the show to **market** a new sour yogurt drink, Suan Suan Ru.

"Super Girl" was not a guaranteed success. MindShare, for example, stumbled just two years ago when it developed a similar **reality** show, "Dreammakerk," for Masterfoods' M&M's brand.

"Our thinking was right, we just didn't execute it the way we needed to with enough marketing support," Mr. Taw said. "It was a painful lesson, but 'Super Girl' gives us more confidence in advertising-funded programming. The success of this show and its satellite-distribution model point the way forward in China."

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