



EXCERPT

With too many dreams which are just adults' hypotheses and too many expectations which gradually become desperation, I am just afraid that my destiny has already been written by society. I know where I should go; but whatever happens, I won't have the right to say it out loud.

—From preface to Su Zizi's "Diary"

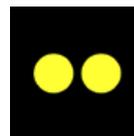
Su Zizi was born when she first undressed and stepped naked in front of the camera. In the beginning, other photographers directed her from behind the lens, but as she gained confidence in her own point of view, Su stopped being a model and became an artist herself. Su did not intend to use her body to force debate; rather, her foray into modeling was a byproduct of simple financial need. She came from a poor family, and in order to chip in on the costs of her education, Su disrobed for modeling gigs that paid 500 RMB a session. She did not take the work lightly. For a nice college girl, it meant stepping far outside the frame. By mainstream standards, nude modeling was a debased, low-level occupation that had unsavory implications. College students, on the other hand, were held in high estimation for their ascension up the ladder—but were considered to have little sexual experience or awareness. As the first college student to publicize her own work as a nude model, Su broke ground and posed unsettling questions about new values involving sexuality, gender, and success in China. The personal liability of her choice to defy society's concepts did not escape her. Su acknowledged the gravity of her transgression by adopting an alternate identity (Su Zizi is not her real name) and kept her job a secret from her parents.

Her first exhibit of nude images, *Who Am I*, took place at Renmin University where the 19-year-old was enrolled as a sophomore. The next show, *Age of Kidnapped Dreams*, assumed grander proportions: eighteen nude photographs and a 5-minute video were shown at a gallery in Beijing's prestigious 798 art district. 2 For the opening, Su literally offered herself up as a canvas, encouraging visitors to paint their own words on her flesh. 3 With each step, Su pushed forward with her transformation from average girl trying to make it in the city to social provocateur. Her daring was uncomfortable and as such, she incited both admiration and anger. Still, in less than a year after her first college show, Su had already published three books about her life and was writing and directing a short film to tell the story of her generation.

Su's work put her on the fringe of society, but she did not ascend to this position in a vacuum. Her role as revolutionary was enabled by important changes in her environment. In this way, Su's story is the story of all modern Chinese youth. Her story would be impossible to understand without first recognizing the classification of generations that pushes youth into feuding camps based on the decade in which they were born. Born in the 1990s, Su was more open-minded than previous generations about expressing her own ideas about sexuality and forcing a response. Her willingness to stray from the mainstream represented new personal and political frontiers for China and, although she speaks as an individual, Su represents scores of others like her. As youth develop confidence in their own points of view, they build increasingly vibrant subcultures that represent a shift away from the mainstream. It is because of these alternative tribes that Su was able to find the necessary support to enable her choice to become a provocateur.

After having witnessed the heartache of the generation before her working to keep up with just-out-of-reach

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consumption imperatives, Su became disillusioned with normal roads to success and determined instead to forge her own path. Like Su, the next wave of Chinese workers sees a profession as a means of obtaining personal satisfaction, not just a salary.

It is difficult to imagine another point in China's history when a 19-year-old girl from a disadvantaged background could have risen to fame as an avant-garde artist. The mix of China's gender imbalance and rapid modernization opened the doors for this young woman, an unlikely protagonist, to walk through and exercise her girl power. In another time, Su's looks might not have warranted a position as a model at all. Attractive, but not in a traditional way, Su's placement in front of the lens represents youth's expanding ideas about new beauty codes – and the idea of difference in general.

Both on and offline, youth like Su are speaking up and finding a space for their opinions to matter. Their ability to mobilize in small groups is helping to spread social activism in the mainland and consequently reshaping what has been a monologue into a conversation. As they gain confidence in their own expression, millions of Su's peers are expanding their scope to re-imagine themselves and the world around them.

Throughout her story, Su took advantage of opportunities to explore and expand her identity. She asked questions about who she was and what she stood for—and invited others to do the same. For young Chinese, the notion of a constantly evolving identity and a redefinition of Chineseness is central to determining the next phase of youth culture. The narrative is far from over.

Su's story has particular value for brands that hope to tap into this young and influential market. Recognizing the impact of Su (and others pioneers hard at work establishing a new paradigm for youth in China) is a critical mission. She is part of a wave of young vanguard Chinese who are determining what they can and should be. Neither their parents nor their international peers have experienced the same degree of opportunity (or enormous expectation) as the first generation to emerge from the world's greatest economic miracle.

This book is based on my own experiences on the ground in the mainland, and it tells the story of Chinese youth as I have come to understand it. It incorporates work that my research team has conducted: rich ethnographies that involve peering into closets, witnessing online communities, and digging into the difference between what is stated and what is real. It channels voices from true culture creators, average kids, and everyone in between. To complement my own experience and present the market from other angles, I have called upon experts from brands, academia, marketing agencies, and the media to bring examples to life and provide critical analysis.

It is my hope that reading this book will enable you to stand confidently on the front lines. By opening new doors of understanding and empathy, connecting with youth will be less formidable and more rewarding. By creating a closer relationship, more relevant products and marketing can benefit companies and consumers.

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