

# Virtual idols take to the real-life stage in China



This handout photograph released by the Beijing Mizhi Tech company, shows fans watching projections of members of the virtual girl band And2girls on a screen at an event in Shanghai. —AFP photos



This photo shows pillows and a shopping bag featuring images of idols of the virtual girl band And2girls at the apartment of fan Liu Jun in Beijing.

Liu Jun has long been a fan of a Chinese star called Amy, a teenage pop singer with red hair whose autobiography he treasures—and who only exists in the digital world. On Saturday “Amy” won a breakthrough virtual talent show in China, where computer-generated entertainers perform in front of real-life judges and tens of millions of online viewers. “You can’t see what they are like in real life, so you can have more fantasies about them,” said 28-year-old Liu, who has attended more than ten of Amy’s concerts and fan events in recent years. “The virtual idol is indestructible—as long as the image is still there, she can stay in your heart forever,” he added.

Amy found fame on “Dimension Nova”, which claims to be the world’s first talent show bringing together digital performers to dance and sing in front of three-real-life-celebrity judges. But Liu has followed Amy’s

career from the start and said he cried when he saw her on the talent show, feeling the performer would finally get the bigger platform she deserved. At one of Amy’s fan events, Liu and other fans talked with her through a two-meter high screen, and a printer attached to the screen gave him her “signature”. Although the virtual idol concept originated in Japan, these digital avatars are now stealing airtime in China, where they appear on TV shows, billboards and even news programs. They now command growing fanbases—research from iQiyi estimates an audience of 390 million nationwide. “The idea of making this talent show is to let everyone know that virtual idols can show up in our real world now,” the show’s executive producer Liu Jiachao told AFP.

#### Making stars

The virtual stars in the show are creat-

ed by a mixture of computer animation and actors—Amy’s clothes, hairstyle and appearance are created by animators, before her human actor takes on everything else. Real-time motion capture and rendering technology mean as the human moves it is reflected by the on-screen idol. To prepare for Amy’s performances, the actor had to take extra dance training. But creators avoid all mention of the existence of the actor behind the idol. “Our logic is that every virtual idol has a real soul,” said Beijing Mizhi Tech chief executive Liu Yong, whose firm created Amy.

“They have their own personality, characteristics and preferences... they really exist in this world,” he told AFP. Instead of showing the actor, the show runs footage of animators anxiously waiting backstage, as if they were the performer’s family. “I see Amy as my daughter,” said 26-year-old

Xu Xingmei, the animator in charge of designing Amy’s expressions and motions. “When I saw Amy show up on the stage, I felt that my daughter had finally grown up.”

#### Technical bloopers

Amy belongs to a booming virtual idol industry that is expected to be worth 1.5 billion yuan (\$230 million) within the next two years, according to Beijing-based market researcher Newsjije. Video-sharing website Bilibili reported a 200 percent increase in viewing hours of its virtual idol live streaming channels in the first ten months of this year. Some experts worry that if too many companies pile in on the market the quality could suffer.

“If you really want to join (the industry), you need money, technology and perseverance,” said Cao Pu, chief executive of

Shanghai Henian Technology, which created one of China’s most successful virtual idols. Since virtual idols live and die through the strength of their technology, the risk of embarrassing technical failures is high. In one awkward show appearance, only Amy’s cap appeared onstage. Other performers have disintegrated mid-appearance after technical breakdowns—including one contestant who froze when he tried to teach the judges kung fu.

“It’s so embarrassing that I don’t think it’s fit for humans to watch,” complained one viewer on social media. But the show’s creators have batted away criticism. “Many viewers who have followed our show from the beginning will find that there has been a great improvement in our technology,” said Liu, the producer. “Controversy is inevitable when new things come out.” —AFP



A cutout of virtual idol Amy on the desk of an animator at the Beijing Mizhi Tech offices in Beijing.



An animator works on designs for virtual idol Amy at the Beijing Mizhi Tech offices in Beijing.



An animator works on hairstyles for a virtual idol at the Beijing Mizhi Tech offices in Beijing.



These pictures released by the Pompei Press Office shows a thermopolium, a sort of street “fast-food” counter in ancient Rome, that has been unearthed in Pompeii, decorated with polychrome motifs and in an exceptional state of preservation. —AFP photos

## ‘Fast-food’ bar frozen in Pompeii ash gives clues on Roman snacking habits

A 2,000-year-old fast-food stall unearthed from the ash of Pompeii has given researchers new clues about the snacking habits of the ancient Romans. The ornate snack bar counter, decorated with polychrome patterns and frozen by volcanic ash, was partially exhumed last year but archaeologists extended work on the site to reveal it in its full glory. Pompeii was buried in a sea of boiling lava when the volcano on nearby Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, killing between 2,000 and 15,000 people. Archaeologists continue to make discoveries there. The thermopolium—from the Greek “thermos” for hot and “poleo” to sell—at what was a busy intersection of Silver Wedding Street and Alley of Balconies, was the Roman era equivalent of a fast-food snack stall.

The team found duck bone fragments as well as the remains of pigs, goats, fish and snails in earthenware pots. Some of the ingredients had been cooked together like a Roman era paella. Crushed fava beans, used to modify the taste of wine, were found at the bottom of one jar. The counter appears to have been closed in a hurry and abandoned by its owners—perhaps as the first rumblings of the eruption were felt—Massimo Osanna, director general at the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, told Ansa news agency.

#### Witness to antiquity

Amphorae, a water tower and a fountain were found alongside human remains, including those of a man believed to have been aged around 50

and discovered near a child’s bed. “It is possible that someone, perhaps the oldest man, stayed behind and perished during the first phase of the eruption,” Osanna told Ansa news agency. The remains of another person were also found and could be an opportunist thief or someone fleeing the eruption who was “surprised by the burning vapours just as he had his hand on the lid of the pot that he had just opened”, added Osanna.

In the latest stage of their work, archaeologists uncovered a number of still life scenes, including depictions of animals believed to have been on the menu, notably mallard ducks and a rooster, for serving up with wine or hot beverages. Previously unearthed was a fresco bearing an image of a Nereid nymph riding a seahorse and gladiators in combat. “As well as bearing witness to daily life in Pompeii, the possibilities to analyse afforded by this thermopolium are exceptional because for the first time we have excavated a site in its entirety,” said Massimo Osanna, director general at the Archaeological Park of Pompeii.

The thermopolium was very popular in the Roman world. Pompeii alone had around 80. The massive site that spreads over 44 hectares (110 acres) is what remains of one of the richest cities in the Roman empire. Layers of ash buried many buildings and objects in a nearly pristine state, including curled-up corpses of victims. Pompeii is Italy’s second most visited site after the Colosseum in Rome and last year attracted around four million tourists.—AFP

## Jackson’s Neverland ranch sold to US billionaire at discount

Michael Jackson’s former Neverland Ranch in California has sold to US billionaire Ron Burkle, his spokesman said Thursday, reportedly at a steeply discounted price of around \$22 million. The late “King of Pop” famously converted his sprawling, gated home into a fairytale-themed retreat—complete with toy railroad, Ferris wheel and orangutans—and penned some of his top hits on the ranch. But Neverland was also the infamous location where Jackson invited children to visit and sleep over, and where he was accused of molesting young boys. It was rebranded after Jackson’s 2009 death as Sycamore Valley Ranch. Burkle, a Montana-based businessman with investments ranging from supermarkets to the entertainment industry, purchased the ranch “as a land banking opportunity,” his spokesman told AFP.

The \$22 million price tag reported by the Wall Street Journal—and confirmed to AFP as roughly accurate, by a source familiar with the deal—would mark



This file photo shows an aerial view of singer Michael Jackson’s Neverland Valley Ranch in Santa Ynez, CA. —AFP

a dramatic decline from the ranch’s \$100 million asking price in 2015. That lofty fee, dubbed “optimistic” by realtors even at the time, was slashed to \$31 million last year, but the ranch still did not sell and was taken off the market. Burkle was flying in the region recently to scout a neighboring property as a possible new branch of his Soho

House private club network when he spotted the ranch and called its owner, according to the spokesman. Jackson reportedly paid \$19.5 million for the property in the 1980s. Thomas Barrack Jr.’s Colony Capital investment firm purchased the ranch from the heavily indebted singer for \$22.5 million the year before his death.

Burkle previously worked as an adviser for the singer on business matters, including resolving debts incurred by his lavish lifestyle in the years before his death. The 2,700-acre (1,100-hectare) estate located 40 miles (65 kilometers) from Santa Barbara features a main house with six bedrooms along with three guest houses, a four-acre lake with a waterfall, tennis courts, several barns and animal shelter facilities. Jackson’s ranch was raided in 2003 as part of a child molestation case against him and police at the time seized a large collection of pornography and images of nude children. Jackson was acquitted in the case in 2005. Last year, HBO documentary “Leaving Neverland” aired testimonies of two men who claim Jackson sexually abused them as children all over the ranch, including the attic, the master bedroom and the pool. The Jackson estate—which is suing HBO for \$100 million over a “posthumous character assassination”—denies all the allegations, as Jackson did in his lifetime.—AFP

## US parents in bizarre ‘balloon boy’ hoax granted pardon

Two Colorado parents jailed for falsely claiming their six-year-old son Falcon had floated away in a homemade balloon shaped like a flying saucer have been granted pardons by the western US state’s governor. Richard and Mayumi Heene pleaded guilty in 2009 to the “balloon boy” hoax, which became a worldwide media sensation with millions watching live as the silver helium balloon drifted through the skies for 70 miles (110 kilometers). The October 2009 incident ended after five hours when the grounded balloon was found to be empty and Falcon emerged from a hiding place at the family home.

The husband and wife, accused by prosecutors of plotting to use the publicity to land a reality television series, were pardoned Wednesday by Governor Jared Polis. “It’s time to no longer let a permanent criminal record from the balloon boy saga follow and drag down the parents for the rest of their lives,” wrote Polis in a statement, saying the pair had “paid the price in the eyes of the pub-

lic.” Law enforcement’s suspicions were inflated when Falcon let slip in a CNN television interview that the entire episode had been done “for the show.” The hoax was seemingly confirmed within 48 hours of the interview, when Japanese-born Mayumi Heene reportedly broke down under police questioning. But the couple’s lawyer told AFP Thursday they only pleaded guilty to stop her from being deported, and had genuinely feared their son was aboard the balloon. “They regret not checking this all out more thoroughly, but it was a coerced guilty plea,” said David Lane. “And I think that also influenced the governor.” He added: “I can now finally say the balloon-acy has ended.”

Richard Heene, handed a 90-day sentence for trying to influence a public servant, now owns a small business and has contributed to his community “by researching and educating about extreme weather events,” wrote Polis. Mayumi Heene, sentenced to 20 days in jail for false reporting to authorities, has become a naturalized American citizen. The couple now live in



In this file photo Richard Heene and Mayumi Heene (left) walk out of Courtroom 3A after their sentencing hearing at the Larimer County Justice Center in Fort Collins, Colorado. —AFP

Florida. Falcon, now a teenager, went on to form a heavy metal band with his brothers, Ryo and Bradford, releasing a song titled “Balloon Boy, No Hoax” and an accompanying low-budget video featuring a mocked-up flying saucer.—AFP