Cultural-Moral Governance and Television Entertainment: The Transformation of Talent Shows in Postsocialist China

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Abstract

This dissertation concentrates on the transformation of China’s talent shows in the context of postsocialist China. It explores how the official censorship and regulation of this Western-inspired genre has dynamically responded to the expanding and deepening media commercialisation as characterised by today’s cultural globalisation and advancing digital technology. By analysing a decade of media policies, representative talent shows and derivative discourses, including public intellectual discussions and online spoofs, I attempt to establish a conceptual framework of ‘cultural-moral governance’ to comprehend the changing talent show culture and its implications through a broader examination of conflict, negotiation and compromise between the party-state, market, media institutions and elite artists.

I argue that talent shows have developed into products striving for political correctness while simultaneously attempting to maintain mass market appeal. Since its phenomenal popularity in the mid-2000s, the authorities have been deliberately intervening in the remaking of the Western-invented genre so as to make it more accommodating to China’s cultural-political environment by resorting to managing its social moral construction. Such a continuous concern is exposed to a dual governing intention of rectifying talent shows per se and manipulating public opinion. At the discursive level, the genre has broken away from its original meaning as a ‘democratic’ and ‘grassroots’ form of entertainment. This point can be evidenced in an increasingly recurring narrative of ordinary people’s talent show dreams echoing the official propaganda of the ‘China Dream’ (Zhongguo meng), as well as an aesthetic pursuit of exquisite professionalism in which the genre is revalued. Meanwhile, media enterprises have colluded with party-sanctioned cultural and moral agendas, and have begun dictating the style of spoofing used by online users, thus seizing the discourse power of evaluating talent shows and weakening the public’s voice. The evolution of the talent show genre and its cultural-political implications suggests that the party-state can strategically employ a flexible and resilient moral ruler to regulate television entertainment discourse, and remould the corresponding political implications. This cultural-moral governing process reflects the party-state’s high adaptability in the face of ideological, economic, and technological forces.
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About the author

Sheng Qu started his doctoral research in Chinese studies at the University of Manchester in September 2014, supported through a three-year SALC Doctoral Bursary. He received his master’s degree in East Asian studies from the Ohio State University in 2014. Before that, he studied at the Communication University of China from 2005 to 2011, when he was awarded the bachelor’s degree in photography and the first master’s degree in broadcast journalism from the Department of Television. His research interests broadly include Chinese mass media and pop culture, film and television studies, discourse analysis, political economy of communications, and western cultural theory.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

In 2005, *Super Girl Voice* (*Chaoji nüsheng*), a talent show featuring only singing that was largely modelled and based on the format of *American Idol*, achieved unprecedented popularity for television across the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Produced and aired on Hunan Satellite TV (HNSTV), this season was open to all female applicants, regardless of singing styles, their appearances, their ages and their origins. More than 150,000 applicants, ranging in age from 4 to 89-year-olds, took part in almost unrestricted auditions. During the five-month campaign, this talent show empowered audience members to cast their ballots by sending short text messages; the audience’s close engagement with the show and most specifically its finalists brought out a collection of active fan groups; in addition, many related pieces of inside news, scandals, and malicious stories soon went viral on social media. During the grand finale, which aired live on 27th August 2005, when a television audience of over 400 million people witnessed the birth of a superstar — the 21-year-old undergraduate student named Li Yuchun, who won the competition. However, the phenomenal success of *Super Girl Voice* gave rise to cultural controversies in China’s one-party socialist state (Y. Huang, 2011). Li’s victory was politically interpreted by some media as a symbolic triumph of Western democratic values that are embedded in the talent show genre (Jakes, 2005; Reuters, 2005). Meanwhile, another intellectual debate concentrated on aesthetic taste, as some critics accused the genre of presenting exacerbated cultural vulgarity and excessive television entertainment. However, by no means have these controversies impeded the proliferation of the genre over the past decade, during which time hundreds of talent shows have flooded Chinese television and video websites. In 2018, talent shows remain one of the most widely broadcast television entertainment genres in the PRC. In particular, since 2010, a constellation of new high-profile talent shows, such as *The Voice of China, China Dream Show, I Am a Singer, China’s Got Talent, and Chinese Idol*, have appeared on the air, thereby marking another popular wave of this Western-inspired genre in China. Despite the fact that some of these shows are largely
based on overseas franchises, these talent shows have been localised in order to survive and grow in the cultural-political atmosphere of contemporary China. During this process, the PRC’s State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) has played a vital role in regulating the genre. Rather than by simply banning the genre, the regulators have interfered in the production and dissemination of the talent shows by adopting various measures, such as prohibiting popular voting via short text messages, restricting broadcasting time-slots, and allocating production quotas to television stations. Notably, the talent show genre has evolved into a television entertainment genre with Chinese characteristics. It conforms to the party-ordained core values but also remains attractive to audience members.

My dissertation examines the discursive transformation of China’s talent shows with a particular emphasis on the role the official ideological regulators have played during this process. I regard the talent show genre as a product of the historical conjuncture that has existed within the nearly first two decades of the twenty-first century. The official regulation and censorship of this Western-inspired genre reflects that manner by which political authoritarianism confronts the issue and compromises with it through a series of postsocialist conditions, including advancing marketisation, cultural globalisation and media convergence, all of which have become significant with the emergence and popularity of the genre. Since I have continuously witnessed and traced the evolution of the genre first as a television viewer, and then in more recent years as a scholar, I am going to explore the following questions: How do we make sense of the localisation of the talent show genre within the historical dimension of China? How can one systematically comprehend the governance process of talent shows, which typically gives outsiders a black box impression? How do political, economic and cultural forces interact with one another in the discursive production and distribution of Chinese talent shows? Finally, how does the shift of talent shows

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1 In 2013, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) was merged with the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) to form the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). After the institutional reform of the State Council in March 2018, SAPPRFT was replaced by a new ministry-level agency — the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). For more details, see page 51.
In order to answer the aforementioned questions, I suggest that the ideological incorporation of the Western-inspired genre into the party-state’s cultural and moral order should be contextualised within the dialectical relationship between political hegemonisation and media marketisation. The popularity of the genre epitomises that Western popular culture has penetrated into China’s cultural field. This indicates the further deepening of market reform after the PRC’s entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001. From copycats to franchised imports, the plethora of Chinese talent shows are exposed to the entrepreneurial ambitions and endeavours of the television entertainment industry by keeping in line with the trend of global popular culture, which is largely dominated by Western capitalist modernity. The talent show genre, allegedly containing universal democratic values, was introduced into China in the mid-2000s. At this time, the socialist market economy was exacerbating various social differentiations at a higher level, than it had been previously. As a project of neoliberal culture, talent shows repeatedly narrate the sort of recurring storylines that ‘everyone who strives hard enough to transform his or her personal identity can win’ (Klaus & Lunenborg, 2012, p. 209). Embedded in this neoliberal discourse, there is a representation of gaining both fame and wealth overnight, which is highly consistent with the people’s imagination of class transition in the materialistic society of contemporary China. During the mid-2000s, there was also booming development of the internet in China. Hundreds of millions of the people, from television viewers to internet users, were empowered to make their own diverse voices heard by participating in the online activities related to talent shows. As media marketisation fuelled the undercurrent, the party-state’s ideological regulators not surprisingly conducted a series of direct interventions in regard to the talent show genre during the following decade. The above cultural phenomena that were involved in the emergence of talent shows indicate that economic and technological forces along with Western democratic values posed a threat to the established legitimacy of the one-party authoritarian system; in turn, the transformation of talent shows over the past decade deserves to be studied as
an important occurrence within which the party-state has established and maintained the cultural and moral order of the postsocialist society by conflicting, negotiating and compromising with the market and the media. It is also notable as a time where television entertainment discourses were reconfigured and, as a result, integrated with politically correct discourses in attractive ways.

My dissertation uncovers the following findings. First, the party-state’s ideological institutions have been able to adopt a cultural-moral governing technology to effectively adapt to the dynamic environment in which media commercialisation, the global flow of popular culture and the development of digital media technology continually challenge the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist regime. This notion of cultural-moral governance is exposed to a core force through which the officials regulate and censor media discourse. Rather than a clear and definite legal framework, it is based on a resilient and flexible moral rationality that is defined and dominated by the Party and the State. During the discursive governance, the party-state’s regulators engage with the media production and distribution sectors in the name of social moral construction in an effort to control different narratives, discourses and values of certain specific cases as well as those of general genres. Second, the official regulation and censorship of talent shows is a systematic project of dialectically and reciprocally ‘governing culture through society’ as well as ‘governing society through culture’. Thus, it implies an ideological struggle between different values. This governing is not only aimed at this Western-invented genre itself but also at its political and cultural implications. This means that the regulators are more concerned with the values that the genre conveys and implies, as well as the ways in which Chinese intellectuals and citizens understand, interpret, discuss and even spoof talent shows. Hence, the social morality to which the governing process resorts is a powerful lever aimed at manipulating the direction and implications of the talent show genre. Third, China’s talent shows have evolved into a politically correct television entertainment genre that is articulated in ways that are appealing to the viewing audience. On the discursive plane, the genre has diverged from two noticeable cultural-political implications of its Western prototype: democratic awareness and grassroots participation. Evidence of these changes can be found in
two corresponding trends: the political embracement of the talent show discourse that is now aimed to achieve the official ideal of the ‘China Dream’ (Zhongguo meng) as well as the reconfiguration of the genre’s aesthetic admiration and market positioning towards exquisite professionalism. Meanwhile, profitable media institutions have colluded with the party-state’s ideological agenda to revalue the talent show genre through appropriating the discursive ways in which internet users are used to parodying the genre.

This introductory chapter lays the groundwork for the dissertation as a whole. It begins to conceptualise my research subject of China’s talent shows by discussing their close relationship to Anglo-American talent shows and their essential characteristics and research importance in Chinese discourse. Subsequently, I will focus on two significant research contexts. The first is the consensus that scholars have interpreted the cultural-political landscape of postsocialist China in dialectical ways of thinking about contemporary Chinese culture beyond either socialist or capitalist framework. The second is the historical formation and development of media commercialisation from which television entertainment grew in China. Consequently, I will explicate my theoretical and methodological framework of ‘cultural-moral governance’ based on a critique of current literature on China’s television entertainment and cultural governance. Finally, this chapter ends with an overview of subsequent chapters.

1.1 Why do talent shows matter?

*The Western origins of the talent show genre*

The popularity of the talent show genre in China is directly related to the broader trend of the global television entertainment industry. For almost two decades, Western, especially Anglo-American talent shows, such as *The X Factor, Britain’s Got Talent* and *American Idol*, have promoted the fashionable rise of the genre across the globe. To trace the origin of China’s talent shows that are
entangled with the global flow of popular culture, one must first consider the history of Anglo-American talent shows.

In the West, talent shows as a cultural form can be traced back to the era before television. The English term ‘talent show’ refers to ‘a competition or show consisting of performances by a series of amateur entertainers’ ("talent show," 2018). As a form of live entertainment activities presented by amateurs, talent shows have long existed in British leisure contexts (Holmes, 2014, p. 3). During the age of sound broadcasting, some talent shows gained popularity as a radio entertainment format. The earliest radio talent show was Major Bowes Amateur Hour (1934-1952), which aired in the United States (US) (Chalaby, 2012, p. 38). During the same period, the radio talent show Carroll Levis’ Discoveries (1935-39, 1953-56) was broadcast in Europe, first on Radio Luxembourg and subsequently on British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC); during this contest, home listeners voted for amateur performers by post to determine the winners (Holmes, 2014, pp. 4-5). Opportunity Knocks (1949, 1956, 1964-78, 1987-90) is another significant representative of early talent shows through the media. The programme first aired on BBC radio in 1949. In 1956, it shifted its broadcasting platform from BBC radio to ITV, making it the first televised talent show. As one of the ‘key generic precursors to the reality talent shows of today’, its winners were always decided by television audiences through telephone, rather than by having a panel of judges as was used by the show’s rival, New Faces (1973-88) (Holmes, 2014, p. 23).

Since the final years of the 1990s and the early 2000s, the talent show genre has developed into a new stage on the basis of early Anglo-American talent shows. In particular, three world-renowned talent show formats that all originated from British creative teams — the Idols, the X Factor, and the Got Talent formats — have played a vital role in promoting the popularity of talent shows all over the world. The new wave of talent shows began with Popstars, which was first broadcast in New Zealand in 1999. The format swept across the globe during the early 2000s (Redden, 2008, p. 6). The Popstars format aims to search for members of a new pop band. Popstars revolutionised the talent show genre
because it not only inherited the two most essential elements of early talent shows, amateur performance and popular voting, but it also adopted a documentary-style narrative structure to present supposedly unscripted scenes in which both the live and home audiences were able to scrutinise many details of the contestants and judges and, subsequently, witness the whole birth of pop stars. Shortly thereafter, this show inspired Simon Fuller to create the *Idols* franchise that aimed at discovering solo pop singers. In the United Kingdom (UK), *Pop Idol* (2001-2003) and *Popstars* (2001-2002, UK version) aired on ITV in succession. Following the success of *Pop Idol* in the UK, *American Idol* (2002-present) became one of the most popular prime-time entertainment programmes in the history of American television, launching the careers of many globally known pop stars, including Kelly Clarkson, Jennifer Hudson and Adam Lambert. In 2004, ITV began to broadcast another singing talent show, *The X Factor* (2004-present, UK version), which was created by Simon Cowell. His SYCO media company then created another globally popular talent show franchise—the *Got Talent* series. This is an all-around talent show format as represented by the programmes *America’s Got Talent* (2006-present) on NBC and *Britain’s Got Talent* (2007-present) on ITV. These three formats share similar competition phases mainly consisting of auditions, training camps, live competitions and finales. They also include similar rules in which judges are responsible for selecting the finalists from large pools of amateur contestants and then home audiences are empowered to determine the overall winners.

This new generation of talent shows not only establishes a platform of showing ordinary people’s talents, but it also narrates one inspirational story after another making a ‘nobody’ into a star. Guy Redden (2008) argues that ‘the currency of the reinvented talent searches lies partly in their articulation of aspirational concepts of personhood that are embedded in the broader neoliberal cultural economy’ (p. 3). Susan Boyle is a good example of this point. Her less-than-eight-minute audition in the second season of *Britain’s Got Talent* is a dream-come-true story; the story starts with an unsuccessful first impression, but it ends up achieving an unexpected self-realisation. She realised such a neoliberal myth beginning with showcasing her marvellous voice in the song ‘I Dreamed a
Dream’ from the musical *Les Misérables* to her tremendous result in the finale where she gained the support of audience members via a vote, which delivers a grassroots democratic value. Undoubtedly, the internet has fuelled the distribution of the appealing talent show scene with its cultural-political implications beyond territorial limitations. Gunn Sara Enli (2009) thinks that the phenomenon of Susan Boyle is a key case of ‘how established mass media increasingly work in tandem with social media’ (p.489). Subsequently, she suggests that the changing of mass communication is due to audience participation via the online platform. The popularity of the global hit audition video demonstrates that online users have actively participated in distributing media content. Moreover, to a large extent, their ability to distribute this content has surpassed the geographical and cultural boundaries to which traditional media forms are subject.

Given that Anglo-American talent shows have successfully appealed to global audiences via online videos and television news coverage, dozens of other countries have copied and purchased corresponding talent show franchises, spawning their own spin-offs. Following this trend, China’s central and provincial satellite channels and online video websites have already produced and broadcasted hundreds of reality talent shows since the mid-2000s, as shown in Appendix 3. Considering the astonishing popularity of the talent show genre in China, which is part of its close engagement with cultural globalisation, my research is aimed at gaining considerable insight into the evolution of this Western-invented genre in China as well as providing China’s case for scrutinising the ways in which strong Western popular culture is reconstructed in an alternative cultural-political context. Here, it is necessary to note that the West and other derivative terms, such as ‘Western’, ‘Western-inspired’ and ‘Western-invented’, which are scattered here and there in this dissertation, may incur some controversies. This might be because the West and related concepts, such as Western civilisation and Westernisation, are not respectively defined through consistent standards both in time and space (Lewis, 2010, pp. 44-47). In other words, it is to some extent true that such general concepts may not be very reliable because the conceptual application would ignore the diversity within the West or Western civilization but also bring us into a simple dichotomy between
Western and Chinese cultures. However, from the perspective of Chinese culture governance and media practice, I think that it is necessary to integrate the West and related concepts into the understanding of China’s talent shows. While Edward Said (1978) coined the concept of Orientalism to explain a general patronising Western discourse on Oriental societies, including Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African regions, it also does exist in China that a kind of antithetical China-centred discursive practice places China and Chinese culture against the West and Western culture. This is not so much the West on the basis of geopolitical convention but rather a West imagined by China. There is a postsocialist paradox for the dualism: while state-run commercialised media takes television entertainment formats from Western countries, the authorities have constantly maintained their vigilance and occasionally promoted the campaign for ‘resisting Western culture and thoughts’ (dizhi xifang wenhua he sixiang). Therefore, the West and related concepts in the dissertation are able to provide us with a useful Chinese perspective through which to make sense of how the talent show genre was imported, produced, governed and discussed.

*Defining ‘talent shows’ in the context of China*

In the dissertation, I define China’s ‘talent shows’ (xuanxiu or xuanxiu jiemu) as a Western-inspired mass media entertainment genre in which contestants compete with one another through performing their talents; such talents include singing, dancing, acting, playing instruments, among others. My research about the transformation of China’s talent shows starts by considering the phenomenal popularity of various talent show copycats in the mid-2000s, such as *Super Girl Voice, My Show and Dream China*. Their producers intended to cope with the growingly drastic domestic market competition by following the trends of the global television entertainment industry. This Western-invented genre featuring amateur participation and popular voting has exerted a massive impact on China’s television entertainment and even on its social culture. The formation and development of the talent show genre epitomises the industry and discursive landscapes of television entertainment and symbolises the times of ‘mass carnival’ (dazhong kuanhuan) and ‘entertainment for all’ (quanmin yule). Later, the
importation of high-profile overseas franchises, such as the *Idols*, the *X Factor*, the *Got Talent*, the *Voice* and others, triggered the second wave of the talent show genre, which has arisen in China since the 2010s. Undeniably, China’s talent shows have maintained discernible traces of their Anglo-American counterparts because of their close culturally generic relationships. Nevertheless, China’s talent shows are not supposed to be blindly or mechanically regarded as duplicates of Western talent shows. In other words, we must not interpret China’s talent shows indiscriminately as forms of Western talent shows. Rather, I suggest that the transformation of the talent show genre in China, which was inspired by and introduced from the Western television entertainment industry, has its own particular developmental process that includes conflict and negotiation between political, economic, technological and cultural forces in postsocialist China. As a result, I will first sketch China’s talent shows conceptually and formally and then I will proceed to explain why there are some important research concerns about examining the transformation of the genre.

Before the introduction of Western television talent shows, some similar cultural forms existed in China. Back in the 1930s and 1940s, Giro’s Night Club (*xianlesi yezonghui*) in Shanghai organised amateur singing competitions to recruit recording singers (M. Huang, 2011, p. 88). Wu Yingyin, one of seven great singing stars at that time in China, started her singing career by winning this competition. Such competitions might be regarded as fledging talent shows in association with mass media as the distribution of popular music engaged with the profit-driven record and film industries. Since the 1980s, many television stations have launched some central or local artistic television competitions and some of them have been regularly broadcast to date. One of the most famous and influential is *National Young Singers Grand Prix* (*Quanguo qingnian geshou dianshi dajiangsai*, 1984 to present), which is produced and airs on China Central Television (CCTV). The sort of officially-endorsed competition mainly adopts a format where authority experts grade and rank contestants with professional experience using academic-oriented standards. In contrast to CCTV’s concentration on professional competitions, Shanghai Television alternatively launched television competitions for amateurs, such as *Casio Family Singing*.
Grand Prix (Kaxiou jiating yanchang dajiansai) in 1985 and Variety Arena of Five Stars (Wuxingjiang hecheng daleitai) in 1997. The latter imitated and copied the long-running entertainment programme Five Lights Award (Wudeng jiang, 1965-1998), which was produced and broadcasted by Taiwan Television (TTV). Some media have even traced the former as the earliest television talent show in China (Sina, 2008a; Sohu, 2008). Indeed, there is a certain resemblance between these early television competitions and the Western-inspired talent shows. However, the former were not designed in the name of the xuanxiu genre at given moments. While CCTV’s early television competitions placed particular emphasis on the professional qualities of cultural elites, Shanghai TV’s early attempts into mass participation were not aimed at creating future stars and they lacked engagement with the capitalist entertainment industry. In other words, these early television competitions reflected the cultural-political condition different from the strongly commercialised pursuit of the Western-inspired television talent shows. Even so, these early television competitions may serve as a comparison reference when studying the emergence and development of television talent shows in China.

In Chinese discourse, the preexisting Chinese term ‘xuanxiu’ began to be widely used to denote this television entertainment genre once the Western-inspired television talent show formats were officially introduced to China in the mid-2000s. The Chinese term xuanxiu is not a literal translation of the English term ‘talent show’; rather, it means ‘selecting shows’ or ‘selecting the excellent’. The word ‘xiu’ is a polysemantic Chinese character with two meanings: ‘shows’ and ‘the excellent’. The term xuanxiu is grammatically used not only as a noun but also as a verb-object phrase. As a noun, the original meaning of xuanxiu was an official activity in ancient China, in which an emperor picked out his concubines from the daughters and other relatives of aristocrats. It also refers to other everyday practices, like a singing competition on campus, recruitment of trainees organised by an entertainment company, or a sports draft for allocating players to professional clubs. In the context of my research on television talent shows, the noun xuanxiu contains two meanings: a specific mass media genre (the
talent show genre) and a single talent-search programme, like *American Idol, Britain’s Got Talent* or *Super Girl Voice*.

Moreover, as a verb-object phrase, the connotation of *xuanxiu* implies a competitive top-down selecting process in accordance with the implication of the idiom story ‘bole’s ability to find a thousand-li horse’ (*bole xiang ma*). Here, while a thousand-li horse (*qianli ma* means ‘swift horse’) is used to metaphorise a talent, an ancient judge named *Bo Le* was famous for searching for good horses. His name has become a proper noun *bole* that figuratively refers to a talent scout and especially a good judge finding hidden talents. Admittedly, the motivations of talent show contestants for participating in television talent shows may vary: they may compete for a prize or for honour, for showing their talents to the public, for their career development, or even for practising the spirit of participation. However, it is almost without exception that the concept of *xuanxiu* implies the judges’ mission to pick out the most excellent contestants, even if different occasions may depend on the corresponding standards in excellence.

Both the Chinese term ‘*xuanxiu*’ and the English term ‘talent show’ can be used to describe a kind of competition that is not necessarily associated with mass media. However, in this dissertation, unless noted otherwise, all scholarly inquiries into talent shows are restricted to the scope of talent shows broadcast on television and/or video websites. In addition, I will still use the English term ‘talent show’ in the following paragraphs in order to remain consistent with the existing related scholarship in English and, more importantly, to reflect the culturally generic connection between Chinese and Western talent shows.

*The contours of China’s talent shows*

As far as the production and distribution of China’s talent shows with which I am concerned, these talent shows may be independently produced by television stations. Since the second decade of the new millennium, many television stations have commissioned the production of talent shows from television production
companies, entertainment agencies and even other institutions, such as drama production teams, large-scale cultural and sports activities, and record companies. By co-producing talent shows, these profitable social institutions aim to recruit actors/actresses, singers, stars and advertising endorsers. CCTV and provincial satellite channels are the main force of producing and broadcasting talent shows. They broadcast talent shows on television channels as well as on their affiliated video streaming websites. Talent shows are produced and broadcast in ‘seasons’ (ji). Each season is a serial and may contain auditions and eliminated competitors, and each season ends when a winner is determined. Because of the flexibility of the production and distribution, the concept of seasons does not mean that talent shows have consistent durations: some are as short as one or two weeks while others may last three or four months. While some popular talent shows may appear on air for one or two seasons every year for several consecutive years, others might irregularly broadcast one season every several years. Moreover, some might be terminated after only one season and a few talent shows have even been cancelled mid-season due to poor ratings during the broadcasts. The durations of a serial of talent show episodes (one season) and a series of talent shows (several seasons) are largely contingent on the official regulation and the market mechanism. Moreover, talent shows vary widely in terms of styles, programming formats, competition rules, and performance genres. Aside from all-around variety talent shows, most shows concentrate on specific performance arts, such as singing, dancing and acting. According to their own application requirements, these talent shows may be also characterised by criteria featuring different contestants’ identities, such as male, female, mothers, children, elderly people, students, amateurs and professionals. Oftentimes, many provincial satellite channels attach great importance to the production and distribution of some high-profile talent shows. This is reflected by their allocating prime time slots (7:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.) on Fridays and Weekends to some of them as their main selling points or designating them as ‘hit programmes’ (zhuda jiemu). Some talent shows have even had their weekly results broadly reported and discussed as cultural events. The popularity of the talent show genre has led to the formation of a highly competitive talent show market where television stations endeavour for viewer ratings and advertisers bid to become title sponsors and/or make product placements during these programmes.
In contrast to previous television competitions of this variety, owing to their shared documentary-style feature, talent shows have displayed a strong narrative function, which is closely associated with reality television (RTV). Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (2004) define RTV as ‘an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real’ (p. 2). It is rooted in the British social-realist observational documentary and in the American social experimental tradition of liberal education (Wood & Skeggs, 2011, p. 5). The term RTV is widely used as a shorthand to encompass many specific genres including talent shows, game shows, talk shows, melodramas, and documentaries. The conceptual abstraction and hybridity of RTV reveals the lack of consistent production and distribution of these subgenres (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004). In particular, many Chinese media practitioners and scholars have long become accustomed to categorising talent shows as a subgenre of RTV and directly using RTV to interpret talent shows (R. Bai, 2014a; Meng, 2009b; L. Yang, 2013). This is likely because talent shows occupy a large proportion of RTV programmes that China’s media copy, imitate, and import from overseas markets. However, the term RTV is a relatively abstract concept so it is difficult to cover all facets of talent shows and it is easy to neglect that the latter’s features are at odds with other subgenres.

Redden (2008) thinks that the talent show genre ought to be conceived as a kind of mixed genre because Anglo-American talent shows have their own long-standing history (p. 10), as has been manifested previously in the evolution from live activities to reality television entertainment. Early talent shows peaked in the 1970s and 1980s; subsequently, the talent show genre has been remade by integrating the elements of ‘stories of personal transformation (lifestyle) and person-watching (reality TV)’ into ‘suspenseful competition[s] (game show[s])’ (Redden, 2008, p. 134). More concretely, new reality talent shows adhere to the cultural-political implication of early talent shows in the form of mass participation and popular voting and they employ RTV-featured documentary aesthetics in order to articulate various stories with their corresponding ideologies. This kind of realistic style shown on television is not so much real, but rather the
sense of realness. Admittedly, audience members do not naively confuse the boundary between authenticity and performance in reality shows (Hill, 2005, pp. 74-75). In particular, it is inevitable that some contestants in reality talent shows are ‘concerned with self-display’, sometimes in an exaggerated manner (Hill, 2005, p. 78). However, the sense of realness that these shows provide can satisfy the voyeuristic desire of viewers. Thus, the sense of realness is not an aesthetic pursuit; rather it is a key selling point of reality talent shows. The elaborate montages can strategically portray different personalities, implications and even dramatic conflicts especially when they are supplemented by behind-the-scenes stories with the main narrative clues. Both through copying formats and purchasing franchises, China’s talent shows are simply a result of the Western-originated genre that was remade by adding RTV’s elements, which enabled it to become popularity across the world. On the premise of the well-perceived cultural coherence, my research concentrates on the remaking process of reality talent shows in China. As such, when I highlight specifically how the talent show genre differs from the general and abstract concept of RTV itself in order to avoid confusing it with other RTV subgenres, I do not overlook the narrative dynamic of RTV-featured television elements as integral in today’s talent shows.

Additionally, the emergence of the talent show genre in the mid-2000s was synchronised with the irreversible media convergence between television and the internet. The production and distribution of China’s talent shows has increasingly engaged with the internet’s interconnectivity in greater depth with the aim of revolutionising the role of audience members. The popular degree of some talent show is evaluated not only by television audience ratings but also by click-through rates and its topic activity online; in addition, the internet has rendered audience members ‘emotionally engaged, and socially networked’ (Jenkins, 2006, p. 20). They are able to watch live streaming videos and short talent show clips on video websites and they can interact with each other on social media, such as Baidu Tieba, Weibo and Tianya Forum. In particular, during the broadcasts of some high-profile talent shows, many active viewers act as free labour, serving as the discursive extension from the talent shows themselves to intertextual online discussions and creative works. Mark Andrejevic calls this new profit-driven
modal the ‘on-line economy’ or ‘interactive economy’; in this way, talent show producers can repackage and sell derivate talent show discourses back to audience members in order to save on their production and promotion costs and to maximise their commercial interests (2002, pp. 252-253; 2004, p. 103; 2006, p. 393). While internet users are adept at transferring their sentiments and attitudes towards talent shows through broader public issues, the digital media environment has intensified the diffusion of diversified political, civic and social values. In this sense, the ideological threat towards China’s party-dominated value system came not only from this Western-invested genre but also from the brand-new ways in which audience members watch television programmes and, subsequently, understand and interpret them. As a consequence, my research will not be restricted to the change of the talent show discourses that have occurred under the party-state intervention. Rather, it will extend to that of online discourses intertextualised with the genre, which I shall discuss in Chapter 5.

_Talent shows bridge the gap between party-state propaganda and television entertainment_

My research topic about the transformation of China’s talent shows explores the following three aspects academically, as these shows have become juxtaposed between politically ideological interventions and economically profitable ventures. First, talent shows provide us with a rich opportunity to systematically scrutinise and evaluate the official censorship and regulation that the party-state passed over television entertainment from the mid-2000s to the present date. During this period, talent shows have become one of the most produced, broadcasted, viewed and discussed television entertainment genres. In addition, they are lucrative media products to television stations, websites, and production companies. Meanwhile, the talent show genre is a rare television entertainment genre that has tight associations with both the trend of global popular culture that largely dominates the West as well as the structural media convergence between television and the internet. It is not difficult to understand why the party-state’s media regulators have consistently kept a close watch on various aspects of talent shows from their production scales and broadcast slots to their formats and
programme content. The regulation and censorship of talent shows is *de facto* involved in the party-led ideology struggle as they resort to the high moral ground. Thus, it is an unavoidable agenda for researchers to understand the Chinese media and popular culture after entering the new century by studying the party-state’s direct intervention in the genre. In my dissertation, I coin the term ‘cultural-moral governance’ to stress that this governing process is resilient, flexible and unstable. Morality, rather than laws, acts as the party-state’s power lever to bridge the gap between the political demands and the growing media commercialisation.

Furthermore, reality talent shows are a discursive sphere within which various competing discourses continuously antagonise, collude with, and compromise one another. The rise of the genre across the globe has been widely deemed as a neoliberal project for advocating self-enterprising individualism to accommodate capitalist modernity. In China, the popularity of *Super Girl Voice* fuelled discursive tensions between the state and Chinese citizens as it challenged both socialist doctrine and Confucian values. Against this background, it is unsurprisingly that the talent show genre was bound to radically change its discourse and cultural-political implications in order to survive in the cultural-political environment that exists in contemporary China. Talent shows have developed into a television entertainment genre that rests in accordance with the officially ordained and promoted ideology. They have not peremptorily switched to the total negation of neoliberal rationality; rather, they have deliberately constructed the representations of ideal individuals and social relations that are consistent with the party-state cultural and moral will. Moreover, they have incorporated market rule and individualistic ambitions into socialist self-reliance values. At the same time, the aesthetic pursuit of the talent show genre has changed from a grassroots complex to an exquisite display of professionalism. This is exemplified by the emergence and popularity of ‘professional talent shows’, a talent show format in which senior artists and stars compete with one another in their own fields. By catering to the dual needs of ideological conformism and market appeal, the talent show genre enables us to examine the continuous and complicated tensions and contradictions between political,
economic and technological forces as well as to make sense of the cultural and moral expectations of the Party and the State.

In addition, studying the evolution of the Western-inspired genre in China can enrich a contemporary understanding of the ‘Western learning spreading to the East’ phenomenon (xixuedongjian). This topic is not new. Rather, it has existed since China’s modern times. It refers to a historical tradition in which the advanced scientific and cultural practices of the modern West began being brought to China during the late Ming and early Qing periods (Zheng, 2002, p. 118). Throughout history, Chinese intellectual attitudes towards learning from the West have varied. Zhang Zhidong, one of the leaders of the self-strengthening movement in the late Qing dynasty, took a relatively conservative view by proposing that ‘Chinese learning is for norms; Western learning is for use’ (zhongxueweiiti, xixueweiyong). In the 1930s, during the Republican period, the leading modern writer Lu Xun coined the neologism ‘grabism’ (nalaizhuyi) (Xun Lu, 1991). This was an active and pragmatic strategy for taking materials that would be propitious to China from Western culture (L. Zhang, 1998, p. 154). These viewpoints on Western knowledge were profoundly rooted in their corresponding geographical, historical and cultural conjunctures. In this same manner, China’s talent shows have a strongly generic bond with their Western counterparts in terms of formats and cultural implications. Some aspects of China’s talent shows have gradually deviated from their Western prototype over the past decade in order to survive in the cultural-political conjuncture of contemporary China. As a result, it is necessary to contextualise the talent show genre with discussions of its historical condition, postsocialist China, as well as with its industry trend of television entertainment in the relationships between the state, the market, and the media.

1.2 Mapping the cultural-political landscape of postsocialist China

To explore the historical incoherence of contemporary Chinese culture, scholars have widely applied a series of terms attached to the prefix ‘post’, such as ‘post-
Mao’, ‘post-socialist’, ‘post-reform’ and ‘post-broadcast’ to give priority to different political, economic and technological elements. After Mao Zedong’s social experiment of egalitarianism failed, in 1978 Deng Xiaoping initiated the reform and opening up policy aimed at setting up a system of ‘socialist market economy’ (shehuizhuyi shichang jingji). In the 1980s, when China moved cautiously on the market reforms, there were increasingly emerging external and internal crises of socialism on both the theoretical and practical layers; this led to the collapse of the Soviet Union-led socialist bloc and the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 in Beijing.

Arif Dirlik (1989) was the first to coin the term ‘postsocialism’, using it to refer to the ‘condition of ideological contradiction and uncertainty’ that resulted from the socialist crisis of the late 1980s (p. 364). While scholars in the fields of Eastern European and Soviet studies apply the term postsocialism to describe the transitions from socialism to capitalism (Brandstädter, 2007), in the context of contemporary China, it is regarded as ‘an experimental way to address a bewildering overlap of modes of production, social systems, and symbolic orders, all of which lay claim to a fledgling world of life’ (Xudong Zhang, 2008, p. 10). Deng’s Southern Tour of 1992 was a further catalyst in the development of the market economy. Meanwhile, he maintained the indubitable legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in the one-party authoritarian political system. The dialectical political-economic strategy corresponds with the constitutional wordings respectively: the ‘socialist market economy’ and ‘the people’s democratic dictatorship’ (renmin minzhu zhuanzheng). While the former employs the socialist orthodox to conceal the developmental strategy of capitalism, the latter places emphasis on the legitimacy of political centralisation in the name of the people. Hence, it is indispensable that a dialectical perspective must be used to theorise and conceptualise the cultural-political condition of contemporary China.

The theoretical paradigm of postsocialism has ignited a series of academic debates surrounding the contradictory roles that the state and the market have played in shaping contemporary Chinese culture since the 1990s (Berry, 2004; Gong, 2012; Hockx, 2015; Inwood, 2014; S. H. Lu, 2001; McGrath, 2008).
The postsocialist paradigm situates the cultural-political condition away from its socialist tradition to a certain degree and it examines the extent to which it is involved in global capitalism. Jason McGrath (2008) suggests that what some earlier research had called ‘Chinese postmodernity’ is de facto a postsocialist version of Western capitalist modernity — he coins this ‘postsocialist modernity’ because both capitalist and postsocialist modernity are processed from a unified social system to a market society (pp. 7-9). For this reason, McGrath (2008) characterises the fundamental dynamics of Chinese culture since the 1990s as ‘marketisation, pluralisation, individualisation, and differentiation’ (p. 7). Similarly, Haomin Gong (2012) argues that the unevenness of postsocialist modernity is an intrinsically and structurally definitive problem in the politics, society and culture of contemporary China, rather than considers it as ‘descriptive’, ‘accidental’ or ‘dismissible’ (pp. 1-2).

While postsocialism stresses the diachronic and historical transition of wealth distribution driven from the state to the market, neoliberalism provides another theoretical paradigm to scrutinise the geographical extension of the Anglo-American dominated global capitalist order towards China and to disclose the nature of the market mechanisms. Since the late 1970s, neoliberalism has become one of the most significant terms for interpreting the situation of the global political economy. In association with the 1980s economic policies introduced by Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US, neoliberalism is often considered an economic doctrine that advocates market economy, deregulation, privatisation and fiscal austerity (Martinez & Garcia, 1997; Robison, 2006, p. xii; Stiglitz, 2002). This laissez-faire political and economic practice is committed to limiting the scope and activity of state control in the name of the market, efficiency and individual responsibility. This has resulted in a serious challenge to social equality because neoliberal policies generally favour spending cuts on social welfare programmes while ‘a handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximise their personal profit’ (McChesney, 1999, p. 7). Regarded as a part of globalised neoliberalism, Deng’s theory clearly emphasises the process of wealth accumulation through a package of market-oriented economic reforms including...
opening the market to the outside world, setting up five special economic zones in eastern coastal regions, and adopting the household-responsibility system in agriculture. In fact, the forging of a ‘socialist market economy… increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control’, which David Harvey (2005) calls ‘neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics’ (p. 120). Aihwa Ong (2006) proposes in her ethnographic study of East and Southeast Asian countries that such characteristics are incarnated in two intertwined neoliberal technologies of governing, ‘neoliberalism as exception’ and ‘exceptions to neoliberalism’ (pp. 3-4). In China, the party-state has neatly applied these two aspects according to different governing needs, expectations, and intentions. On one side, neoliberal as an exception is deployed in a demographically and/or regionally specific range in which neoliberal calculations are arranged to stimulate entrepreneurial activities and to speed up Chinese integration into global markets. On the other side, exceptions such as neoliberalism refer to the exclusion of certain populations and places out of neoliberal calculations on the basis of political considerations; in this sense, either maintaining the established social order or depriving them of political protection results in uneven social development.

Both the ‘postsocialist modernity’ and ‘neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics’ perspectives manifest a paradoxical and, to some extent, self-contradictory conjecture of today’s China indicating that a self-declared socialist political system has been sparing no effort to promote the market-oriented developmental strategy in all aspects of social and cultural life; this has resulted in an inevitable status quo that China has increasingly become one of the most unequal societies in the world (Harvey, 2005, p. 142). In China, social polarisation has increased with the advancement of the market economy. Because of the imbalance between political and economic reforms, Hui Wang (2003) suggests that the structurally social inequality ‘quickly transformed itself into disparities in income among different classes, social strata, and regions, leading rapidly to social polarization’ (p. 13). Further, a series of social contradictions, including between regions, ethnicities, classes and the centre and the local, has become increasingly apparent through social campaigns. In Wang’s (2003) view,
the reform nature of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics is based upon the ‘devolution of authority and the contract system and, under the premise of there being no protection from a democratic system, comprehensively promote spontaneous privatisation’ (pp. 14-15). In postsocialist China, this state-controlled neoliberalism is a hotbed for commercial monopoly and the centralisation of wealth. Admittedly, the socialist market economy has successfully propelled tremendous prosperity for China’s social development and, from a general view, it has helped hundreds of millions of the people eliminate poverty. Nevertheless, with rampant corruption problems, the processes of social differentiation and polarisation have continuously undermined the country’s social stability. Many public incidents have echoed complicated social contradictions in various fields, including migrant workers, rural resources, public health, food security, regional poverty, and unemployment among disabled people. Such issues have emerged alongside the reconfiguration of social relations.

Cultural practices, symbols and industries in contemporary China are not only situated through self-contradictory and unbalanced postsocialist conjuncture. As Gong (2012) argues, various forms of the relationships between culture and economy are featured by ‘a mixture of tension, conflict, cooperation, incorporation, conspiracy, and negotiation’ (p. 7). According to Heather Inwood (2014), this is encapsulated in two intertwined aspects, including both the understandings and functions of culture, that contemporary Chinese culture has gradually become compatible with the condition of market economy (p. 23). The understandings of culture have changed from having elitist and high-culture overtones to having more flexible and universal implications. This adequately reflects the conceptual integrations of the term culture with the development of socio-cultural fields, such as popular culture (liuxing wenhua), entertainment culture (yule wenhua), leisure culture (xiuxian wenhua), and many others (Barmé, 1999, p. 281). Meanwhile, the functions of culture have not been limited to the range of ideologies in the ‘superstructure’. Rather, they have evolved into a lucrative means by which governments, commercial institutions, public sectors, and individuals engage with each other to produce and consume cultural symbols, concepts and activities (Yuezhi Zhao, 2008, p. 86). From the perspective of
McGrath’s (2008) postsocialist modernity, this sort of power-driven cultural transformation veers from ‘state heteronomy’ toward the ‘relative autonomy’ of culture (pp. 9-12). This does not mean that party-state cultural intervention has disappeared. McGrath (2008) suggests that political forces still periodically take diverse measures to reaffirm state heteronomy (p. 11). In short, the cultural-political conditions of postsocialist China are dynamic, not a stable or static, process where contemporary Chinese culture not only ‘respond[s] to the dominant trend of marketization’, but also ‘cope[s] with the remnants of state heteronomy’ (McGrath, 2008, p. 11).

Such responses from the party-state to dynamic contemporary Chinese culture during the process of marketisation can be captured in the party-state’s paradoxically cultural attitudes in dialogue with two main critical paradigms of Chinese intellectuals: Liberalism (ziyouzhuyi) and New Leftism (xin zuopai) (J. Xu, 2002). The former group pins its hopes on the forthcoming of a civil society and claims to unleash the agency of individuals in a free market mechanism, as well as offering protection of private property rights. The latter group is strongly critical of neoliberal capitalism and stands firm for marginalised and underclass people dispossessed by China’s economic reform. It also advocates for a more positive role played by the party-state in the fairer top-bottom wealth distribution. In various aspects of socio-cultural life, the party-state has actively promoted neoliberal rationalism in the formation of China’s ‘middle class’ (zhongchan jieji). Ren Hai (2013) asserts that the government aims to establish a neoliberal rationalised society with the middle class as the main body, although this idea is glutted with multiple risks (p. 14). Culture, as a fundamental element in this process, has constantly civilised the people to abandon the socialist ‘iron rice bowl’ (tie fanwan), a Chinese catchphrase referring to secure jobs assigned by the state, so as to invest in market mechanisms. While tie fanwan indicates the organisational and life-building mode of socialism, market mechanisms might be seen in one after another wave of from ‘jumping into the sea of commerce’ (xiahai) in the 1990s to leading the recent official campaign of ‘encouraging people to do business creatively and drive innovation’ (dazhong chuangye, wanzhong chuangxin). While such economic liberalisation has increasingly
transferred into demands for political openness, there is an alternative voice of complaint against unfair social distribution of wealth and resources in such a socialist country. This is where the legitimacy crisis of the CPC comes in. It has been a necessary and urgent agenda of the party-state to implement a discursive system aimed at turning the crisis into an opportunity to reinterpret its own importance in the historical process of China’s development. It is also a moment where the CPC can go about exhibiting the capability of social redistribution at the moment in order to maintain its own legitimacy – that is just what the officials call ‘maintaining social stability’ (wei hu shehui wending, commonly abbreviated to weiwen). In fact, authorities have never been openly committed to neoliberalism as an official ideology. While carrying out a series of state-controlled neoliberal economic practices on a large scale, the party-state has incorporated neoliberal market values into a brand-new ideology package in the name of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. ‘The socialist legacies and promises of the Chinese state’, as Yuezhi Zhao (2008) states, ‘must be taken seriously, and it would be a mistake to simply equate the Chinese state with neoliberal market authoritarian states elsewhere in the world’ (p. 6). As a result, the political discourses of ‘harmonious society’ (hexie shehui) and ‘China Dream’ (Zhongguo meng) have respectively outlined its vision of the cultural and moral order during the leaderships of Hu Jintao (2002-2012) and Xi Jinping (2012-present).

Along with the party-state’s neoliberal practices, another two driving forces have intensified the social ruptures and self-contradictions of postsocialist society going into the twenty-first century: cultural globalisation and advancing digital technologies. First, while China has shown resolve in opening up its gates to the world, the introduction of knowledge and experience from the external world is bound to become an important driving force in social development. In particular, since the country’s accession to the WTO in 2011, Chinese officials and a number of social sectors have launched unprecedented initiatives and exercises to actively keep pace with the international order and participate in global issues. There is nevertheless a self-contradiction concerning national collective memory along with such a strong impulse for facilitating integration into the world economy. As
Western powers historically utilised advanced ships and cannons to bombard isolationist China into opening up to Western-defined modernity, it is not surprising that there are historical traumas associated with a sense of national humiliation. These sometimes undermine, distort, and even disfigure the Chinese practices of Western well-developed learnings. During the search for modernity, a long-standing discourse about ‘catching up with Western powers’ (*zhuigan xifang lieqiang*) has implicitly constructed an over-general imagination of Western culture and things as ‘advanced’, ‘developed’ and ‘leading’. These can be captured from a Chinese idiom referring to the common social attitude of ‘blindly worshipping foreign things and fawning on foreign powers’ (*chongyangmeiwai*).

The party-state regime has deliberately become adept at employing these two contradictory attitudes and sentiments towards Western elements to act as a unifying political force. While the party-state’s philosophies are based on Marxism, a political thought originating from Western theories and practices, it is simultaneously anti-Western and prevents Western infiltration in the socio-cultural field. The label ‘Chinese characteristics’ has become a shield for the party-state, helping it to go about disguising the fundamental social transformation from socialism to capitalism. It has also permitted profit-driven socio-cultural subjects, allowing the survival of Western elements in the Chinese market.

The progress of digital technologies has profoundly changed the ways in which we access, store and share information, as well as the structures of social mobilisation and networks as people cannot be limited to established social organisational entities, such as working units (*danwei*), families, schools, communities and so on, to interact with each other. Socially uneven developmentalism makes salient the dialectical relationship between the internet and the society. While it may be due to the gap between the rich and the poor that digital divides still exist to different degrees in China, the internet or online sphere has become a major battlefield of public opinion and ‘discourse power’ (*huayu quan*) with the aggravation of various kinds of social contradictions, even struggles between different groups (Yuezhi Zhao, 2008, p. 305). In his study of online activism, Guobin Yang (2009) defines it as composing all kinds of
contentious activity in the application of new communication technologies (p. 3). Writing in 2009, he contends quite optimistically that the upsurge of online activism stands for a ‘palpable revival of the revolutionary spirit’, which had long quieted with the failure of the 1989 student movement until the arrival of the internet era (G. Yang, 2009, p. 209). However, although social media added fuel to the revolutionary wave of the ‘Arab Spring’ in the early 2010s, the so-called ‘Chinese Jasmine Revolution’ (Zhongguo molihua geming) in 2011 became a ‘democratic farce’ (minzhu naoju) without substantial influence or contribution (Qian, 2011). These two different results from online to offline activism manifest the divergent extents and/or structural forms of engagement of digital technologies with established social systems. While the internet shortens the geographical and even emotional distances between people in a huge country, its technological integration with smartphones has tightly bound hundreds of millions of people to digital network grids, along with the spatial and temporal movements of the population. In other words, the popularity of the internet de facto provides a more effective governing channel for the party-state regulators to tighten social control because the resources, information and ownership of digital technologies are unequally distributed among social groups; similarly, there is fundamental unevenness in the established social structure. With increasing growth and diversity of the public’s voices on the internet, the party-state has not only strengthened the breadth and depth of censorship and regulation for maintaining its ideological authority, but it has also advanced the level of creativity and innovation in manipulating public opinion.

In a nutshell, these dialectical understandings of contemporary Chinese culture are deeply embedded in the postsocialist tension between political authoritarianism and necessary economic development. In particular, pursuing integration into the global economy and the pervasiveness of digital technologies have further complicated the cultural-political conjuncture alongside the unevenness of social development since the new millennium. The conjuncture of postsocialist China can help us clearly understand how media commercialisation contributes to the formation and evolution of television entertainment, as well as how the party-state’s ideological regulators advance their multipronged means of
regulating television entertainment, from the sector itself to even the discourse surrounding entertainment. My dissertation outlines the tension between these two intertwined processes by comprehensively examining talent shows. Original characteristics, implications and values of this Western-inspired genre have been contingent on the rearrangements and reconfigurations of its formats, discourses, themes and motifs that make up talent shows and shape talent show culture. In this sense, cultural survival and adaptation, as well as the relationship to the official regulation and censorship all work to render the transformation of talent shows a promising research area.

1.3 The history and status quo of television entertainment programmes

This section reviews the development of China’s television entertainment programmes and examines related fields of production, media technology, policy, distribution, genre and format by placing it in the context of the radical transformation of the television industry. Jonathan Gray defines ‘television entertainment’ as,

Program[me]s, segments, or channels that enjoy, amuse, delight, and perhaps even enlighten. Or, to be precise, it is to refer to television that tries to achieve such goals. Given the vast differences in individual notions of what actually is entertaining and what is not, by television entertainment, I mean programming designed with entertainment as the primary goal’. (cited in R. Bai & Song, 2014, p. 1)

Gray frames a relatively general concept that encapsulates far-reaching entertainment genres with original design and creative intentions aimed at amusing and entertaining audience members. In his view, ‘television entertainment’ is simply a more succinct version of ‘television entertainment programmes’. However, my study takes a narrower approach by considering ‘television entertainment programme’ a specific concept that excludes television dramas. While taking China’s television industry practices and generally accepted perceptions by Chinese audiences into consideration, I divide the concept of ‘television entertainment’ into two main categories: television dramas and entertainment programmes. Indeed, China’s entertainment programmes share a
common historical background, from political-economic conditions to concrete official policies to media technological advancements, with television dramas and other genres. Yet, entertainment programmes have their own developmental trajectory clearly at odds with television dramas. These are capturable in the forming process of the former from ‘literary and artistic programmes’ (*wenyi jiemu*) to a mixed juxtaposition of variety shows (*zongyi jiemu*) and entertainment programmes (*yule jiemu*). The transformation towards the emergence of entertainment programmes is consistent with the commercialisation of the television industry away from the ideological party-state apparatus. The popularity of reality talent shows in the mid-2000s is a catalyst that urges the production and distribution of entertainment programmes to further accommodate market mechanisms by keeping close engagements with the global television industry from productive forces to relations of production. This provides a macroscopical perspective for better exploring the party-state’s role in regulating the talent show genre after the 2005 season of *Super Girl Voice*.

Beijing TV, the first television station in China and the predecessor of China Central Television (CCTV), started its experimental broadcasting on 1 May 1958 and officially aired in September of that year (Y. Zhu, 2012, p. 13). Its main programming genres included news, documentaries, television drama and ‘literary and artistic programmes’. Early television was aired live. At the time, ‘literary and artistic programmes’ was an ideologically correct name for television programmes designed with entertainment because the socialist television industry drew a clear boundary with capitalist media and entertainment industries. According to his talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942, Mao claimed that the role of literature and art in China should ‘reflect the life of working class’, ‘consider them as an audience’, as well as ‘serve politics, and specifically the advancement of socialism’ (Mao, 1942). During the premiere broadcast of Beijing TV, and after an interview regarding the importance of carrying on the ‘Great Leap Forward’ campaign, the Central Radio Experimental Theatrical Troupe recited two poems titled ‘The Three Girls From a Factory’ (*Gongchang li laile sange guniang*) and ‘The Fanfare of the Great Leap’ (*Dayuejin de haojiao*), and the Beijing Dance School performed three dances (Huang & Yu, 1997, p. 566; X.
The poetry recitation and dance, aired live, was the earliest form of China’s television entertainment programmes – even earlier than the widely recognised television drama *A Mouthful of Vegetable Pancake* (*Yikou cai bingzi*) in June 1958 (X. Chen, 2001, p. 35). Beyond that, other literary and artistic programmes appearing on Beijing TV at that year also include a theatrical show performed by disabled soldiers and Peking opera performed by national treasure-class masters Mei Lanfang and Zhou Xinfang (Xing Zhou, 2009, pp. 122-123). On 1st October 1959, Beijing TV broadcast the gala live for celebrating the 10th anniversary of the founding of the PRC held in Tian’anmen Square. Subsequently, Beijing TV first produced and broadcast a gala during the Spring Festival of 1960 and *Smiling Evening Show* (*Xiaode wanhui*) three times from 1961 to 1962. The comedic gala format sparked controversy against the background of the Great Chinese Famine (1959-1961) (X. Chen, 2001, p. 35). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China’s television industry was so seriously impeded that Beijing TV suspended its broadcast service to concentrate on taking part in the political campaign from January to February in 1967 (Guo, 1989, p. 91). In this period, almost all television programmes placed emphasis on class struggles and Maoism (Chang, Wang, & Chen, 2002, p. 7). While the CPC labelled Chinese traditional and Western performing arts as ‘cultural cancer’ (*wenhua duliu*), ‘revolutionary’ became a vital element of literature and art, as revolutionary songs (*geming gequ*) and revolutionary model operas (*geming yangbanxi*) became the only performing artistic forms approved by the state-run propaganda apparatus (Moskowitz, 2010, p. 19).

Television’s social impact was quite limited when newspapers and radio still dominated mass media in China. In particular, the limitations of television broadcasting technology, such as shortages of television stations, transmission equipment and television professionals, hindered the development of the television industry for many years. For example, the television signal of Beijing TV merely covered the central urban area of Beijing (Guo, 1989, p. 89). In addition, television sets were extreme luxuries for most Chinese households. Even if a few could afford television sets, most had to be subject to the allocation of ‘supply coupons’ — a special product of the planned economy — through which
the government controlled the distribution of resources and goods. Since buying, owning and even watching television sets were privileged, collective viewings at cultural hubs and workplaces were more common for ordinary Chinese people (R. Bai, 2014b, p. 29). Even so, this stage still left some legacies regarding the emergence and development of entertainment programmes, mainly because it trained the first generation of television practitioners. These people later took part in reinaugurating television entertainment programmes in China.

China’s television industry has already embarked on a track of steady development since the late 1970s. As television sets grew in popularity with the advent of the colour television era, the party-state shifted in a strategic pivot of official propaganda from radio to television. In 1983, the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television initiated a plan for establishing a four-tier institutional structure of television broadcasting consistent with the four vertical levels of administrative divisions: central, provincial, prefectural/municipal, and county (Chang et al., 2002, p. 10; F. Xu, 2009). Meanwhile, advertising revenues progressively displaced state and local fiscal appropriations as the main income source of television stations (R. Bai, 2014b, p. 30). The enormous increase of television stations and the extension of broadcast time exposed the serious shortage of domestic production capacity of television entertainment, including everything from dramas to entertainment programmes. This caused many television stations to rely highly on overseas television programme resources (R. Bai & Song, 2014, p. 2).

On May 1, 1978, Beijing TV was officially renamed China Central Television (CCTV) (Chang et al., 2002, p. 7). From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, CCTV was the only power in the nationwide market of television entertainment, mainly because other levels of television stations could only cover the administrative regions under their jurisdiction. In the embryonic stage of the media market, the relationship between propaganda and entertainment remained ambiguous. As television entertainment was still categorised as part of literature and art with high cultural implications, it inevitably conveyed propaganda messages in an implicitly moralistic and didactic way.
Since 1983, CCTV began to produce and broadcast *CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala* (*Zhongyangdianshitai chunjie lianhuan wanhui*, 1983–present) live on each Chinese New Year’s Eve. This programme has not only made many television stars, artists and entertainers to rise to fame overnight, but it has also become one of the most crucial media rituals or entertainment spectacles for celebrating the most important traditional festival in China (Keane, 2002, p. 80). As represented by the *Spring Festival Gala*, television gala (*dianshi wanhui*; literally: ‘television evening party’, commonly abbreviated to *wanhui*) is one of the earliest and the most important formats of China’s television entertainment programmes. The format could be a variety show like *Spring Festival Gala* that includes two main types: ‘language programmes’ (*yuyanlei jiemu*) and ‘singing and dancing programmes’ (*gewulei jiemu*). These are often combined with acrobatics, magic tricks and Chinese opera. Meanwhile, there could be a gala with concentration on specific genres or performing forms, such as ‘singing and dancing gala’ (*gewu wanhui*), or ‘comedic gala’ (*xiju wanhui*). Other than the *Spring Festival Gala*, CCTV and many local television stations produced other galas for celebrating other festivals or important political anniversaries, including the National Day (1st October), International Labour Festival (1st May), the Mid-Autumn Festival (15th August in the Chinese Lunar calendar) and so on. The aesthetics of the gala format are characterised by the refinement and perfection of professional performances onstage by artists or stars (G. Zhang, 2005).

In the early 1990s, while CCTV’s television dramas created a succession of national sensations, CCTV also launched several well-known variety shows (*zongyi jiemu*) that it aired routinely every week. *Variety Panorama* (*Zongyi daguan*, 1990–2004) and *Zhengda Variety Show* (*Zhengda zongyi*, 1990–present) were two important representatives. *Variety Panorama* was an extension of the gala format into becoming routine variety shows, so it was commonly regarded as ‘a mini Spring Festival Gala’ (*xiao chunwan*) (G. Zhang, 2005). Before the mid-1990s, *Variety Panorama* was the most popular variety show as its average audience ratings reached about 18% (T. Li, 2004, p. 46). Moreover, *Zhengda Variety Show* has changed its formats several times as the longest continuous broadcast entertainment programme in China (Keane, 2015, p. 92). Its original
classic format was based on copyright cooperation with the Taiwanese travel show *Run around the Earth* (*Raozhe diqiu pao*). In this quiz game show, studio celebrity guests answered questions about the cultures and customs of different countries generated by outdoor scenes filmed by the China Television Company (CTV), a leading television institution in Taiwan. Additionally, CCTV’s other well-known television variety programmes in the period include *Qu Yuan Miscellaneous Altar* (*Quyuan zatan*), *Art Horizon* (*Yiyuan fengjingxian*) and *East South West North Middle* (*Dong nan xi bei zhong*).

With the popularisation of cable television, provincial television stations successively launched their own satellite channels covering the whole country in the mid-1990s. This reduced CCTV’s dominance in the nationwide market, forcing it to reluctantly share the market with rising provincial satellite channels (Chang et al., 2002, p. 13). In fact, CCTV has always played an authoritative role in the field of television news in China by virtue of its administrative level and resources. For example, all provincial satellite channels must follow the SARFT’s compulsory requirement to broadcast CCTV’s *News Simulcast* (*Xinwen Lianbo*, 1978-present), a leading daily news programme, at 7 p.m. every day (Guo, 1989, p. 93; Y. Zhu, 2012, p. 76). Under the circumstance, many provincial satellite channels have strategically concentrated on television entertainment. Hunan Satellite TV (HNSTV) was first to challenge CCTV’s monopoly in television entertainment (R. Bai & Song, 2014, p. 4; Y. Zhu, 2012, pp. 196-198). HNSTV took the lead with a series of successful entertainment programmes, including the game show *Happy Camp* (*Kuaile dabenying*, 1997-present), the dating show *Dating of Rose* (*Meigui zhiyue*, 1998-2005) and the talk show *Pure Love* (*Zhengqing*, 1998-2008), as well as the top-rating drama serial, *My Fair Princess* (*Huanzhu gege*, three seasons, 1998-1999, 2003), jointly produced alongside a Taiwanese company. HNSTV’s accomplishments, which happened in quick succession, indicated that the production and distribution of television entertainment were brought to a market-oriented new level in the pursuit of from audience ratings to advertising incomes. In other words, there has been an industry consensus beneath the surface of political correctness that television
entertainment – as cultural commodity – is designed to make as much money as it can.

At the turn of the century, the party-state further deepened the ‘broadcasting system reform’ (guangdian tizhi gaige), which was considered part of the broader ‘cultural system reform’ (wenhua tizhi gaige) (Xiaoling Zhang, 2011; Yuezhi Zhao, 2008). The reform was aimed at pushing marketisation and commercialisation of China’s media industry to the fullest extent, or as much as the political system could accept. Rather than changing the industry overnight, setting industry trends was a step by step process. Over time, the party-state has promoted several rounds of media consolidation. The first wave involved smaller television stations named after ‘cable’, ‘economy’ and ‘education’ successively merging into the stations of the same or one higher administrative level. Once media convergence was officially put on agenda, CCTV and many provincial television stations integrated with other types of media and cultural institutions, including newspaper, radio, websites, artistic troupes and performing venues in order to nurture a set of media conglomerates (Z. Hu, 2003; Yuezhi Zhao, 2000).

In the context of uneven pervasiveness of media groups in different provinces, Hunan Broadcasting System (HBS), Shanghai Media Group (SMG), Zhejiang Radio and TV Group (ZRTG) and Jiangsu Broadcasting Corporation (JSBC) have stood out from fierce media market competition since the mid-2000s. In particular, their corresponding satellite channels HNSTV, SHDTV, ZJSTV and JSTV, known collectively as ‘top-tier satellite channels’ (yixian weishi) or ‘top 4 satellite channels’ (sida weishi), have become the main players in the nationwide television entertainment market, surpassing CCTV in many respects. The rationale for establishing media conglomerates is in accordance with the dialectical calculation of the party-state (Meng, 2009b, pp. 262-263; Schneider, 2016, p. 193). While large media institutions can benefit from both higher economies of scale and scope, it is more convenient for the party-state media regulators to control, supervise and manage these state-owned enterprises.

Since the beginning of the new century, television entertainment programmes have actively learned and borrowed successful foreign formats to
become an important profitable cultural form and television entertainment genre in parallel with television dramas. As early as 1994, the SARFT stipulated that domestic television channels are prohibited from broadcasting foreign television programmes in prime time (People, 2004). Meanwhile, a majority of China’s television stations have improved their capabilities to independently produce entertainment programmes. However, producing television entertainment programmes has heavily relied on copying or purchasing overseas formats to offset the serious deficiency of media innovation and creativity. CCTV’s two high-profile shows were a case in point. While CCTV purchased the franchise of GoBingo to produce the Chinese version as Luck 52 (Xingyun 52, 1998-2008), Happy Dictionary (Kaixin cidian, 2000-2013) was the copycat of another British game show Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? (Keane, 2015; Xie & Wang, 2005, pp. 94-97). In 2005, HNSTV engendered the great audience ratings and commercial successes of Super Girl Voice by copying and remoulding the talent show format of American Idol that swept across the world at that time. This reality talent show challenged the established conception and order of television entertainment in many aspects (see Chapter 2). Of particular note was the remarkable popularity of Super Girl Voice and how it provided its domestic rivals with an exemplary profitable model, though controversial. Copying and imitating successful overseas genres and formats is an alternative way of ‘getting rid of the stale and bringing forth the fresh’ (tuichen chuxin) on the basis of dynamic of the fierce market competition (R. Bai & Song, 2014, pp. 4-5). While the opportunistic strategy saved the costs and time of research and development of entertainment programmes for the media, the industry’s ecology has long been mired in the homogenisation of television content with waves of talent shows and dating shows. Since 2010, more television media have been inclined to import the official franchises of popular foreign entertainment programmes because of capital accumulation (Keane, 2015, pp. 91-105). Whilst China’s media institutions have endeavoured to get on track with the global wave of different subgenres and formats, RTV has gradually kept pace with television dramas and become one of the most popular television entertainment genres in China in terms of broadcast output and audience size (R. Bai & Song, 2014, p. 5). With the rapid upgrading and renewing of entertainment programmes, there is a new industry consensus
that the popular duration of these phenomenal shows has been increasingly difficult to make last more than three seasons (*huobuguo sanji*).

China’s television media has not only upgraded their production levels and standards in copyright cooperation with foreign companies, but also explored a new production mechanism that can be more aligned with the rules of the market economy. At this point, there are two main kinds of production systems: producer responsibility system (*zhipianren zerenzhi*) and commissioning system (*zhibo fenli*), both of which are aimed at streamlining internal administrative control and delegating fiscal and personnel power to the lower levels. Under the encouragement of the authorities, the two systems have been coordinated and implemented in parallel, though to differing degrees, by various media outlets. In the mid-1990s, first CCTV and then other provincial-level television stations implemented a producer responsibility system (Kong, 2014, p. 7; Y. Zhao, 1998, p. 114), in which producers control programme budgets and recruit crews. Correspondingly, many television stations and channels implemented a ‘system of elimination of the worst’ (*mowei taotaizhi*). The programme with the lowest annual average audience rating would be eliminated from the current channel or removed from satellite to territorial channels in the following year. Under the pressure of audience rating competition, a producer is responsible for the developmental direction and future of their programme and production team. As audience ratings were considered the most important criterion of evaluating the quality of television programmes inside profit-driven media institutions, many programmes with high-grade or elitist overtones unsurprisingly met with a dilemma. They were forced to eliminate many teams after reorganisation turned to entertainment programmes, or sometimes added entertainment or light-hearted elements into news, science and educational programmes and documentaries.

Since 1996, the SARFT has repeatedly issued guidance and documents to promote reform in terms of ‘[separating] TV production and broadcast functions’, which is also called the ‘television commissioning system’ (Redl & Simons, 2002, p. 24). Indeed, authorities have legitimised private capital’s access to the production of television programmes. Since as early as the late 1980s, the
production of television dramas and advertisements has been practised in the commission system. Meanwhile, the commissioning policy excludes news programmes, and is mainly targeted at entertainment programmes, along with sport, lifestyle, and educational programmes. Commissioning production means that television channels became a publishing broadcaster to commission and/or purchase programmes from production companies. There are two kinds of commissioning production models for entertainment programmes that evolved in the 2000s (Dong, 2012). The first is that media conglomerates set up affiliated production companies that provide their own or sometimes external channels with programming resources. This situation is what some scholars call ‘one station/channel, two systems’ (Redl & Simons, 2002, p. 18; Yin, 2010, p. 100). Another model is one wherein independent private production companies produce programmes and then sell them to television stations. Television broadcasters have long dominated the commission cooperation with private companies. While the former possesses channel resources and strong financial foundations, the latter serve as contractors that execute the former’s plans and usually do not share advertising revenue (Dong, 2012).

Hong Yin (2010) thinks that either of them is not an ideal commissioning paradigm because the relationship between producers and publishing broadcasters is not equal (pp. 98-99). This situation has changed to some extent, as ZJSTV commissioned the talent show *The Voice of China* (2012-2015) along with the Shanghai Shiny Star Production Company (*Canxing Zhizuo*). Canxing Production not only purchased and held the *Voice* franchise but also covered all production costs, allowing it to gain an equal footing with ZJSTV in the commissioning venture. As a result, Canxing became the first private television production company in mainland China to ‘share all revenues (and risks) for a single television programme with a broadcaster’ (Keane, 2015, p. 124). In November 2013, the 3rd Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC issued a ‘Resolution concerning Some Major Issues in Comprehensively Deepening Reform’. The 36th article clearly pointed out that ‘under the precondition of

\(^2\) The document is titled ‘Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu quanmian shenhua gaige ruoguan zhongda wenti de
persisting in the operation of publishing powers and broadcasting power under special permission, it is permitted to separate production and publishing, and production and broadcast. The increasing openness of the production market has had the effect of swelling the scale of private production companies (Y. Hu, 2017; Keane, 2015, p. 122). It has also triggered further brain drain from traditional television stations to production companies and internet media enterprises in recent years (Liang, 2017; Sina, 2014c).

The development of digital media technologies has radically changed the communication models of television programme and the structure of the media industry. Watching television programmes no longer happens exclusively through television screens, but has been extended across a number of devices including computers, tablets and mobile phones. Along with the replacement of the linear model of communication by the nonlinear, it has been very flexible for audience members to determine the time and place of watching a television programme. These changes first benefited from the digitalised upgradation of cable television from standard to high definition, which the authorities strongly pushed since the mid-2000s to further increase the number of viewing-received channels up to about 200 for each individual or household user. More significantly, these changes resulted from a transition from cooperation to competition between traditional television and new internet media institutions. As mentioned above, television media have already progressed through media consolidation to expand business into the internet domain by uploading their programmes to their affiliated online platforms, as well as sharing or selling online broadcast rights to other video websites. In particular, to promote their high-profile television dramas and entertainment programmes, television channels are still willing to cooperate with four major portal websites: Sine, Tencent, Sohu and Netease.


In the meantime, some internet media enterprises are no longer satisfied with serving as foils to television channels with the rapid evolution of video streaming technology. Their video websites have not only provided internet users with video-sharing services, but also produced their own entertainment programmes and dramas, commonly called ‘web-based entertainment programmes’ (wangluo zizhi yule jiemu) or ‘web-based variety programmes’ (wangluo zizhi zongyi jiemu, commonly abbreviated as wangzong), as well as ‘web-based dramas’ (wangluo zizhi ju, also as wangju). The first web-based entertainment programme in China is traceable to the talk show *Dapeng Show (Dapeng debade, 2007-2016)* by Sohu Video (C. Zhu, 2016). At first, web-based entertainment programmes could not threaten the dominant position of those produced by traditional television stations, considering the obvious gap in the quality and texture between them due to the former’s shortages of production capacity, technology, experience and funds. In recent years, web-based entertainment programmes have overwhelmingly improved up to a new level of production cost and quality that is not inferior to their television counterparts (Y. Cao & Xin, 2017; C. Zhu, 2016). A debate-themed talent show produced and aired on iQiyi, *U Can U Bibi (Qipa shuo, 2014-present)*, is representative of this transition. The sizeable market of web-based entertainment programmes has become dominated by five major video websites, including, iQiyi, Tencent Video, Youku, Sohu Video and LeTV (Jianming Liu & Xu, 2017).

In the foreseeable future, economic and technological forces will further reinforce the irreversible trend of media marketisation and diversify mass media genres. And television and web-based entertainment programmes will likely fuse into a unified mass media genre. No matter how Chinese mass-mediated entertainment programmes would evolve, what we cannot ignore is that the party-state has been and will be playing a crucial role in controlling the direction, scale and speed of the process in the context of postsocialist China. With reference to how television and online entertainment discourse is subsumed within the party-sanctioned cultural and moral order, a theoretical and methodological framework is needed to explicate the discursive transformation of talent shows, a connecting subgenre between television and web entertainment programmes.
1.4 Towards a theoretical and methodological framework of ‘cultural-moral governance’ for entertainment programmes

The development of television entertainment has largely kept pace with the expansion of media commercialisation. Liberal scholars interested in Chinese media and cultural studies celebrate media commercialisation as a positive factor in promoting political democratisation because market forces can effectively corrode and differentiate highly centralised political power (Lynch, 1999). However, many studies have dismantled the antithetical relationship between the state and the market, which is mainly based on the paradigms of Western liberalism and neoliberalism, by empirically investigating the so-far undiminished capacity of party-state propaganda. Yuezhi Zhao (1998; 2008) suggests that media commercialisation is a process of balancing between the Party’s line and the bottom line to complicate and diversify the ways of the ideological apparatus and then reinforce its political control over the society. Ruoyun Bai (2014b) coined the term ‘disjunctive media order’ to describe the equally coexistence and interpenetration of political and economic forces that shape China’s media order in the following six aspects: (1) state policy and regulation, (2) media institutions, (3) industry structure, (4) constitution of media capital, (5) content and (6) audience (pp. 13-14).

It is a recurring story that the party-state weaves its ideological agendas into popular cultural and artistic forms in different periods, such as folk dancing, oral literature, films, traditional operas and crosstalk (xiangsheng). The intertwined relationship between ideological propaganda and popular culture has entered television entertainment in the context of media commercialisation. A growing number of scholars have accordingly traced the party-state’s propaganda, rhetoric and ideologies through television entertainment discourses, as well as examined the regulation and censorship of television entertainment. What calls for special attention is the obvious academic preference for television dramas in this field. In her study of the classic show *Yearnings* (*Kewang*, 1990), Lisa Rofel (2007) argues that this family melodrama, which narrates a story of two ordinary Chinese families beginning in the Cultural Revolution and going to the era of reform and
opening up, is a socialist moral site where the authorities make efforts to integrate the state’s interest into the discourses of the drama by portraying negative images of intellectuals after the Tian’anmen demonstration (pp. 31-64). Ying Zhu and Florian Schneider are both keen to point out that a set of dynasty dramas, such as Yongzheng Dynasty (Yongzheng wangchao, 1999), Kangxi Dynasty (Kangxi wangchao, 2001), and The Great Han Emperor Wu (Hanwu dadi, 2005), implicitly promoted the political value of a strong and benevolent central government that can effectively safeguard social fairness and justice (Schneider, 2012, p. 206; Y. Zhu, 2008a, p. 28). Ruoyun Bai (2014b) examines the transformation of corruption dramas from constructing the righteous role played by the Party in the anti-corruption campaign, as represented by Pure as Snow (Daxue Wuhen, 2000), to normalising corruption in her analysis of Snail House (Woju, 2009, also translated as Dwelling Narrowness) (pp. 6-7).

In comparison with numerous well-developed studies on television dramas, China’s television entertainment programmes have remained underexplored. While most television dramas are released on videotapes and DVDs with cultural and/or profitable motives after their broadcasts on television channels, entertainment programmes have been consumed for instant gratification. Because it has been always very difficult to track down the primary sources of entertainment programmes produced and broadcast before the internet era, there are few related studies. Those that exist are only relatively superficial analyses of the institutional environment and programme formats and mostly lack systematic discussion of related media policies and subgenres in the period. CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala is a rare exception because it was published on different types of video storage medium and then uploaded to video websites. Gala studies contain many cultural-political aspects, including media ritual, cultural construction of the nation-state, performing forms and ideological implications (Du, 1998; Xinyu Lu, 2009; B. Zhao, 1998).

Digital media technologies have not only changed and diversified ways of watching television programmes as mentioned in the previous section, but also improved research infrastructure. It has not been as difficult to collect the primary
sources of recent entertainment programmes as it was in the past because most have been documented online almost synchronously with their television broadcasts. This point has resulted in two research trends. First, as the digitalisation of television entertainment followed closely after the popularity of the talent show genre in the mid-2000s, there was a research impulse with a particular focus on Super Girl Voice from different angles in the following decade. These studies broadly cover industry tendencies (Keane, Fung, & Moran, 2007), content analysis (H. Xiao, 2006), intellectual responses (Y. Huang, 2011), cultural citizenship (Wu, 2012) and fan studies (L. Yang, 2009a, 2009b; L. Yang & Bao, 2012). Some studies discard democratic implications embedded in Super Girl Voice and unmask the show’s political-economic essence. Bingchun Meng (2009b) argues that this talent show reinforces and naturalises the established power structure in the three aspects of production, participation and interpretation. Miaoju Jian and Chang-de Liu (2009) claim that it creates ‘democratic entertainment’ as new forms of commodity and utilises ‘dreams’ to manipulate its contestants and audience members as unpaid labour.

The second trend is that some edited and authored books incorporate entertainment programmes, along with television dramas, commercial films and other cultural forms, into a relatively wider framework of television entertainment, popular media or the whole entertainment industry (R. Bai & Song, 2014; Cai, 2016; Kong, 2014; Wu, 2017). Shuyu Kong (2014) concentrates on the production and distribution of mass media entertainment genres ranging from blockbuster films to reality television, as well as the audiences’ affective engagement with these cultural products. Shanshan Cai (2016) explores the updated motives and approaches of state propaganda contextualised in the commercialisation of the media entertainment industry by examining best-selling films, online documentaries, CCTV’s Moon Festival Gala (Zhongyangdianshitai zhongqiu wanhui), revolutionary TV dramas, and education programs. Jingsi Wu (2017) adopts the theoretical framework of an aesthetic public sphere to analyse public discussions around four of the most representative cases in the past decade, including the prevalent talent show Super Girl Voice, the dating show If You are the One (Feicheng wurao, 2010-present), and two family dramas, Dwelling
Narrowness and Naked Wedding (Luohun shidai, 2011). Jingsi Wu uses these to probe deeply into entertainment’s role during the formation of citizenship and the establishment of a civil society in modern China.

These scholars have pioneered and promoted research into China’s television entertainment. In particular, their works have already deepened and enriched understanding of the political-economic, cultural and social implications of television entertainment in the country. However, this body of scholarship is still exposed to some inadequacies. There is a noticeable lack of studies about the transformation of entertainment programmes as a whole or even in the case of certain subgenres. After all, they have their own peculiar history, structure, rhetorical issues, discourses, and communication modes, so we cannot indiscriminately copy the existing studies on television dramas or simply confuse it with other television entertainment genres. Since the mid-2000s, the latter’s production and consumption scales have gradually caught up with those of television dramas. Reality talent shows have played an integral role during this process. Therefore, the above-mentioned studies on Super Girl Voice are a key to putting television entertainment programmes in a central place of understanding when it comes to contemporary Chinese culture. Super Girl Voice is nevertheless only a starting point of the talent show genre. A very small number of studies have preliminarily mentioned the changes of talent shows after the popular peak of Super Girl Voice, such as a general increase of the production level of shows and a decline in fan engagement (Huang, 2014; L. Yang, 2013). Unfortunately, there has not to date been a book-length study dedicated to systematically examining the transformation of the Chinese talent show genre from the mid-2000s to the present. Remedying this will lay a solid foundation for deeper discussions of China’s television entertainment programmes going forward.

The notion of ‘cultural governance’ in the field of political science has increasingly been introduced into critical inquiry into the relationship between politics and mass media entertainment. Schneider (2012) gives a book-length insight into a systematic and comprehensive picture of the party-state’s cultural governance through television drama series. Li Luzhou (2015) deeply discusses
the evolution of cultural governance with the growing prosperity of China’s online audiovisual industry. Both Schneider and Li’s studies are *de facto* based on Michael Shapiro’s (2004) conceptualisation of ‘cultural governance’, which other political scientists William Callahan (2006, pp. 15-16) and Elizabeth Perry (2013, p. 3) have further developed in their own cultural-political analyses from the Pacific Asia region to contemporary China. Shapiro (2004) claims that cultural governance during nation-making processes has a symbiotic relationship with cultural resistance. While cultural resistance is regarded as a set of representations that challenge state sovereignty, cultural governance refers to various genres of symbolic political expression that constitute and legitimise sovereignty (Callahan, 2006, pp. 15-16). Schneider (2012) neatly summarises studies into the latter as an attempt to understand ‘how culture shapes state sovereignty’ (p. 8). The notion of cultural governance is useful and meaningful for us to get insight into the transformation of talent shows because the genre has been continuously involved in a constellation of complicated conflicts and negotiations between different ideologies. In particular, talent shows have played an irreplaceable role in the marketisation of television entertainment from the mid-2000s to the present date. Therefore, my research on the discursive transformation of talent shows is able to provide an updated account of the party-state’s governing processes over and through mass media entertainment programmes.

To bridge the current research gaps, I develop a theoretical and methodological framework of ‘cultural-moral governance’ through which to examine the discursive transformation of talent shows and the party-state’s governing role in this process. I have established this framework on the basis of previous studies on cultural governance and China’s television entertainment; in this process, I elaborate upon ‘cultural governance’ and focus on its moral element, or: ‘cultural-moral governance’. There have been many strong and insightful studies regarding the macrostructure of the party-state’s propaganda system and its recent evolution (Brady, 2009; Stockmann, 2013; Xiaoling Zhang, 2011), so I will only briefly discuss some elements of it here. The party-state’s cultural governance contains two layers: the institutional and the discursive. They are together exposed to the ambiguous and paradoxical attitudes of the authorities.
towards the market. In Ruoyun Bai’s (2014b) view, there is a ‘disjunctive’
governing logic of the party-state’s media policy and regulation within which to
lay stress on marketisation and ideological control (p. 14). The disjunctive logic
implies that the officials regulate and censor media discourses in the party-
ordained moral order but actually aim at increasingly commercialising the media
industry in another quite different order. While the regime anchors their hope on
strengthening television and even the whole media industry by pushing them to
the market, at the same time the party-state takes active measures to supervise and
manage market-oriented media discourses from news to television entertainment
in its own enforced moral order. The latter’s governing process is limited to a
discursive range. My study aims to narrow down the concept of cultural
governance to what I call ‘cultural-moral governance’.

In the one-party system, the CPC’s will is highly coordinated with the
governing practices of the state in the form of governmental institutions. Hence,
the subject of exercising the ruling power is commonly called ‘the Party and the
State’ (dang he guojia) in Chinese discourse, and it is usually abbreviated as
‘party-state’ in English-language scholarship. While the party formulates
fundamental ideological directions and strategies through the Publicity
Department of the Central Committee of the CPC (zhonggong zhongyang
xuanchuan bu), the corresponding administrative departments of the state are
responsible for ensuring effective implementation. In terms of cultural-moral
governance over television and online entertainment programmes, the National
Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) is currently a ministry-level agency
under the State Council specifically responsible for regulating and censoring
media content. Established in March 2018, the agency is a most recent result after
several complicated institutional reforms. Its predecessor is the State
Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television
(SAPPRFT), which was formed from a merger between the State Administration
of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) and the General Administration of Press
and Publication (GAPP) in March 2013. The administrative function of regulating
and censoring radio and television programmes has continued to be a core duty
from the SARFT to the SAPPRFT to the NRTA, all of which Chinese media and
the public have always referred to as *guangdian zongju* (literally, the General Bureau of Radio and Television).

In fact, there were only two laws and regulations enacted in the 1990s that pertain to the sector: ‘Radio and Television Administrative Regulations’\(^5\) and the ‘Advertising Law’,\(^6\) which involve the general norms of broadcasting media content (Yu Zhao, 2015, p. 61). However, on a practical level, they have hardly satisfied the governing needs of coping with ever-changing situations with media commercialisation owing to their lack of specific and detailed articles. As a result, official regulation and censorship have long been dependent on all kinds of temporary orders, directives and notices aimed at specific problems. The legal base of governance here derives from paragraph 2 of Article 90 of the constitution:

The ministries and commissions issue orders, directives and regulations within the jurisdiction of their respective departments and in accordance with law and the administrative regulations, decisions and orders issued by the State Council.

Instead of a sound legal system, social morality serves as an effective lever to regulate and censor media discourses, during which the party-state’s ideological regulators set up moral agendas and standards flexibly and resiliently. Yun Long and Chungang Zhao (2013) describe the feature of such a governing process as ‘pan-moralism’ (*fan daode zhuyi*). The juxtaposition of the ‘cultural’ with the ‘moral’ in the concept of ‘cultural-moral governance’ reveals its nature of ‘rule by law’ that is different from ‘rule of law’. While the former is a socialist idea with Chinese characteristics that subjectively lays a governing tool controlled by the


regime, the latter refers to an objective and rational legal system that all people and social institutions, including the government, must obey. In the mechanism of rule by law, cultural-moral governance exists where there is cultural resistance. As such, the ‘law’ in the ‘rule by law’ is actually a series of rules and regulations meant to reinforce the relatively high moral pursuit that the party-state selectively promotes when occasions demand it.

Under this circumstance, there is a dynamic bargaining process about social morality between power and culture with the extension and deepening of neoliberal marketisation across and into various aspects of China’s social and cultural life. Accordingly, a top-down propaganda framework is not enough to gain insight into a complete landscape of cultural-moral governance. Therefore, in my research framework, a theoretical combination of Antonio Gramsci’s ‘cultural hegemony’ and Michel Foucault’s ‘governmentality’ is needed to underscore the significant connectivity of the party-ordained moral agendas between the party-state, market and culture. Their theories highlight two different dimensions of the relationship between power and culture: the structural and the instrumental, both of which are interwoven between the political authoritarianism and economic decentralisation of postsocialist China.

Gramsci’s hegemony (1971) theory can be used to explicate the power structure of cultural-moral governance in a macroscopic sense by deconstructing the power of a ruling class into two aspects: one is ‘political hegemony’ coercively exercised by the organisation of violence; another is ‘cultural hegemony’, which refers to a regime’s ideological control over the masses through intellectual and moral means. In this sense, cultural-moral governance is a contest for cultural hegemony as its ultimate goal is not only to grasp the ‘power of discourse’ but also to govern the value system of society. Compared with repressive political hegemony, cultural hegemony attaches importance to a relatively soft negotiation through which the authorities intend to interfere in shaping the national popular consciousness through combining their ideology with social morality. The construction of cultural hegemony is a complicated, rather than simply top-down, process of ideological struggle, during which cultural
sectors as represented by mass media play a significant role in establishing and disseminating the ‘mainstream melody’ (zhuxuanlù). Zhuxuanlù refers to the party-ordained ideology that is meant to ‘maintain the correct guidance of public opinion’ (jianchi zhengquan de yulun daoxiang). Such a dynamic system has been manifested in the transition in China from an ultra-left socialist society wherein continuous class struggle maintained the social structure, to a postsocialist society, where market economy has actively enhanced the subjective initiatives of individuals who remain shackled by the chains of one-party authoritarianism.

Based on this structural logic, Foucault’s view of governmentality provides an instrumental version of understanding how nonpolitical forces, especially economic factors, are calculated in the framework of cultural-moral governance. Foucault’s governmentality is a technology of power aimed at ‘population’, rather than specific individuals. He iconoclastically considers power a dispersed and omnipresent force rather than a possession, so ‘mechanisms of power’ is a worthier subject of study than those who possess power (Foucault, 1980, p. 51). Neoliberalism can be conceptualised as a sort of governmentality that ‘relies on market knowledge and calculations for a politics of subjection and subject-making’ (Ong, 2006, p. 13). In the context of Western post-welfare states in the pursuit of ‘small government’ and ‘big society’, self-disciplining, self-managing and self-enterprising individuals governed by neoliberal regimes at distances are dependent on the free will of human beings (Rose, 1996, pp. 57-58). In the mechanism, neoliberal governmentality mainly adopts various means of cultural training about the ‘regulation of conduct’ to indirectly control enterprising individuals in the name of their own desires, such as ‘lifestyle maximization’, ‘free choice’ and ‘self-responsibility’, translating ‘the goals of political, social and economic authorities’ into ‘the choices and commitments of individuals’ (Rose, 1996, p. 58).

In comparison to the dichotomy between state and market in the Western liberal or neoliberal framework, it is in the framework of cultural-moral governance that the market is an instrumental power that yields to the consolidation of the party-state’s cultural hegemony within the socialist market
economy system. As a consequence, cultural-moral governance has two fundamental and reciprocal layers: ‘governing culture’ and ‘governing society through culture’. During this process, mass media as part of the market plays a dual role: as a governed object on which the authorities fix their eyes to ensure that the production of media discourse strictly conforms to their ideological commitment. Meanwhile, mass media becomes a governing tool (governmentality) to manipulate the population by implicitly distorting and moralising the neoliberal spirit of the market into national, social, public and collective goals.

Within the party-state’s structural power of cultural hegemony, the neoliberal mechanisms of ruling at a distance have been translated into the agenda of postsocialist China in which the regime values self-sufficiency and self-discipline as the moral will, instead of the free will. This places emphasis on the party-state’s power and personal obligations in the context of socialist ethics with Chinese characteristics. In their study of American television, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay (2008) point out that RTV is a quintessential cultural technology for promoting the neoliberal rationality of self-governance and self-reflection that constitutes a good citizen (p. 4). China’s talent shows characterised by the RTV’s narrative structure belong to a television entertainment genre inspired by its Western counterparts. As such, my scholarly inquiry into the genre’s discursive transformation away from neoliberal rationality through the ‘cultural-moral governance’ framework can provide a case of how structural and instrumental powers remake the genre in the context of postsocialist China, but also an examination of how its cultural-political implications are exposed to contemporary ideological confrontation.

In this research, I employed multiple methods of field investigation, documentary research, policy analysis, and critical discourse analysis. As I made my research questions and objectives increasingly well-defined and specific, I deployed these methods in different research stages. I have been an avid television viewer who started to watch the genre from the 2004 season of Super Girl Voice onward, witnessed the phenomenal popularity of its 2005 season and successively watched a litany of talent shows as part of my personal recreation;
complementarily and for just as long, I am a scholar who has studied Chinese media and paid attention to industry trends alongside a network of classmates and alumni that are distributed across China’s media sectors. This dual identity means that I have synchronously experienced, perceived and reflected on the transformation of China’s talent shows and media industry in the twenty-first century. Indeed, I have applied phenomenological observation and theoretical criticisms throughout the past decade, rather than adopting an intensive approach to retrospectively view this continuous cultural phenomenon in a shorter time as one less familiar with the industry might.

Officially, I started this research project in September 2014 and carried out my fieldwork in the summers of 2015 and 2016. During this process, I interviewed media practitioners and visited the production headquarters of CCTV, Tencent Video and iQiyi in Beijing. Throughout the course of my research, I have also collected a large number of official documents, yearbooks, industry reports, and academic journal articles both online and through informants. I utilised the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (IAWM) to preserve some primary and secondary references as shown in their Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) with ‘archive.org’ and to check and confirm that other references to URLs had been preserved by other internet users and can be captured on the IAWM. This means that even if the original webpages were updated or deleted, all online resources would remain accessible to subsequent researchers. Simultaneously, I compiled a list of China’s talent shows aired on CCTV, provincial satellites and video websites from 2004 to 2018 (see Appendix 3), and I chose four from at least two dozen talent shows that I had watched in full length or in segments. I then performed a close reading and discourse analysis of these four high-profile talent shows, including Super Girl Voice, The Voice of China, China Dream Show and I Am a Singer. While Super Girl Voice is a widely-recognised starting point of China’s talent shows owing to its ground-breaking significance in contemporary Chinese culture, the other three represent the breadth of the genre that has revived since the early 2010s.
After my long-term empirical observation, fieldwork and data collection, I decided to use critical discourse analysis as the primary methodological tool for investigating power relations in television entertainment discourse. Critical discourse analysis is a widely used and reliable qualitative method underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology. From the perspective of social constructionism, discourse is a kind of social practice that constitutes the social world and is, in turn, constituted by other social practices (Fairclough, 1992; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, pp. 61-62). The critical tradition of critical discourse analysis offers insight into how various taken-for-granted talent show discourses are involved in shaping our understanding of contemporary China, and how political, economic and social contexts interplay on talent shows. For uncovering the transformation of talent shows through cultural-moral governance, my analytical method is based on Fairclough’s discourse-practice approach, incorporating other discourse theories as well as varying (yet related) approaches of discourse analysis into different aspects of the research. Since the theoretical framework of cultural-moral governance maps both structural and instrumental power relations in a societal network, my research is concerned with three aspects relevant to talent shows: (1) concrete measures and cultural-political logic that the party-state takes to interfere in the evolution of the talent show genre, (2) ideological implications and intentions of regulating society through talent show discourses, as well as (3) online agenda-setting endeavours for rearticulating cultural-political implications embedded in talent shows. The social practices are closely connected with the corresponding discursive practices, including talent shows themselves but also other communicative events, such as official documents, public intellectual discussions and online spoofs.

In terms of analysing a communicative event, Fairclough developed a framework for studying its three dimensions: text, discursive practice and social practice (Fairclough, 1995a, p. 97; 1995b). First, the textual dimension is a descriptive stage which one can use to analyse the features of language texts, such as grammar, syntactic analysis, rhetorical devices, metaphor and cohesion. I also drew on Halliday’s systematic functional grammar (1985) theory to cover not
only verbal but also nonverbal languages, including images, music, gestures, actions, symbolism, sounds, and so on.

The second dimension interprets the relationship between the discursive processes of production and consumption of texts, in particular drawing on the theories of interdiscursivity and intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992; Kristeva, 1980a, 1980b). Interdiscursivity refers to the interweaving of different genres, discourses, or styles in a given text. My interdiscursive analysis contains many different layers, perhaps most prevalently including those between ideological discourses, between political and television entertainment discourses, and between television entertainment and online spoofing discourses. In Chapter 3, I integrate Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (1985) into the discussion on the interdiscursive relationship between the official ‘China Dream’ and other ideological discourses; this lets me highlight the ‘discursive struggle’ and process of forming the political discourse. Intertextuality is a way of shaping a text’s meaning by quoting from, citing, alluding to or reference to another text. The analysis of intertextuality is a fundamental part of discourse analysis, and it may be distributed throughout the thesis. In addition, intertextuality reflects a key feature of China’s singing talent shows themselves, since most are intended to cover old songs rather than releasing new and original songs; I thereby attempt to discuss the nature of this intertextual phenomenon in Chapter 4 by employing the theoretical lens of Jacques Attali’s ‘repetition of music’.

The third dimension is an explanatory analysis of relationships in social practice, concentrating on the social, institutional, and personal conditions of the communicative event and the constitutive effects of discourse (Fairclough, 1995a). Fairclough (1992) thinks that a combination of textual and social analysis as featured in the three-dimensional model requires supplementation with non-discursive theoretical and analytical perspective (p. 64). Ruth Wodak (2008) suggests that discourses are contingent on the specific historical and cultural context around them (p. 5). As such, understanding talent shows is not limited according to the genre but also involves other related practices, such as policymaking, public debating and spoofing. Such a network of social and
discursive practices relevant to talent shows is historically and geographically dependent on the postsocialist structure of twenty-first century China, which I have discussed earlier in this chapter. While the three dimensions are used to analyse the different aspects of this network, my dissertation will disclose the hidden knowledge of power relations deployed and reflected in talent shows.

1.5 Dissertation overview

Following the introductory chapter, my dissertation is organised into four main chapters with a concluding chapter. Chapter 2 takes an in-depth look at the reconfiguring process of China’s talent shows due to the official regulation and censorship of the Western-inspired genre from the mid-2000s onward, to recent times. The party-state’s direct intervention in the genre was a political and ideological response to growing media commercialisation that largely diverged from the party-ordained cultural-moral order, as reflected in the ‘Super Girl’ phenomenon. The governance occurred as a reactive and opaque process in which the ideological regulators reasserted their cultural hegemony again and again – it did not occur as the result of a singular action or sweep. In broader terms, the process should be regarded as part of the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign, which was a continuous ideological struggle that officials launched against the collapse of social morality in the early 2000s. In this sense, the party-state’s cultural-moral governance regulated not only talent shows and other television entertainment genres, but also different ideologies and social groups in a wide spectrum, from New Leftists to liberals. This point is reflected in an obvious trend that more and more talent shows have striven to cater to the party-state’s ideological agenda so as to evade strong implications of democratic values and accusations of vulgar culture.

The following two chapters focus on the discursive transformation of recent talent shows whose productions have aimed to strategically balance political correctness and market appeal. In Chapter 3, I explore how the television entertainment discourses of talent shows have become articulated surrounding the
‘China Dream’ political discourse in order to avoid the original democratic implication labelling such shows. The official notion of this China Dream has been ubiquitous in various social and media discourses since late 2012 when President Xi Jinping proposed it as a grand narrative of defining the legitimacy of the CPC’s regime in the context of an increasingly and newly marketised Chinese society. To provide insight into the ideological essence of the China Dream, I analyse two widely-perceived discursive formulas by respectively taking two ZJSTV’s talent shows, The Voice of China and China Dream Show, as case studies. I first show how The Voice of China became a postsocialist theatre where contestants and judges are constructed as ideally ‘good persons’ with both artistic and moral excellence. Such a discursive formula always displays the national and individual dreams that are compatible with one another. Then, I concentrate on a self-declared public interest talent show named China Dream Show that helps ordinary people realise their dreams. This show deliberately exerts two intertwined discursive systems – neoliberal rationality and sentimentality – to narrate dream-realising stories. While contestants need to demonstrate the feasibility of their dreams in rational ways, they are also supposed to emotionally emphasise their dreams’ significances. As sponsors are featured in the show to provide human, material or financial resources for dream-seekers, it is the nature of such a representation of public interests that the government shifts its social responsibility onto the market although it still firmly retains the power of defining whether a dream aligns with the official and approved ‘China Dream’.

Chapter 4 deals with another discursive and aesthetic transformation of talent shows from previously grassroots complex to exquisite professionalism, which can be adequately captured by the emergence and popularity of professional talent shows as a variant of the talent show genre. My case study example I Am a Singer is a high-profile singing talent show in which veteran singers and even pop stars can compete with each other seriously. The replacement of amateurs by professionals in such a talent show format implies a strategy of cultural-moral governance that the authorities have been intended to draw cultural elites over to their side through the Chinese cultural-linguistic market. While I Am a Singer is a lucrative business for media institutions and
artistic professionals, the party-state’s cultural hegemony has been reaffirmed in the following two aspects. On the one side, the collective representations of famous singers in the show have been contingent upon the discursive construction of a benevolent professional community in which these celebrities are portrayed as the role models of following the party-ordained moral order. On the other side, this internationalised casts of the talent show could reflect the ambition that China’s television industry has planned to expand the influence beyond the geographical scope of mainland China. However, this talent show trend of exquisite professionalism has been also exposed to the vulnerable nature of singing talent shows. Through the perspective of Jacques Attali’s ‘repetition of music’, these capitalist cultural products are always committed to pursuing a nostalgic atmosphere by covering well-known songs and utilising high-pitched voices to prove singing skills. Meanwhile, through an analysis of Taiwan’s intellectual discourses about the sensational popularity in Taiwan of the 2013 season of *I Am a Singer*, I argue that while the mainland’s talent show attempted to construct its own benevolent and positive images and showed that contesting singers from both sides of the Taiwan Straits are friendly with each other, Taiwanese viewers may have an alternative interpretation beyond the producers’ expectation.

The fifth and final chapter studies the transformation of the ways in which talent shows are discussed, spoofed and even revalued. Drawing on Michel de Certeau’s theoretical concepts, I regard such a transformation as moving from ‘tactics’ to ‘strategies’ because different social actors are unevenly granted online cultural citizenship in a neoliberal age. By analysing the cultural-political intentions of three recent media products produced by profitable media institutions to spoof talent shows, I found that although their discursive style has some similarities to those online parodies created by internet users, there is a fundamental difference between them. Online users who parody talent shows are not intended to attack the genre itself, but instead, such parodying is done for the purposes of expressing their political, public and social ideas. Most media enterprises who are subjected to the party-state’s cultural-moral governance are inclined to satirise talent show formats and stars *per se*, in amusing or exaggerated
ways. Because media organisations are superior to online users in terms of the uneven distribution of online resources and ownership, such a discursive trend from internet users’ tactics to media conglomerates’ strategies can effectively curb the public’s voice. More significantly, the trend has seriously eroded the public’s opportunities for, and capabilities of, engaging in social agendas. Lastly, the concluding chapter contributes to a review of the transformation of China’s talent shows, and especially how the party-state’s cultural-moral governance has penetrated into the different layers of the production and distribution of the genre. It ends with a discussion about locating my study in a broader context of politics and entertainment.
Chapter 2 The remaking of talent shows through cultural-moral governance

The popularity of talent shows is one of the most representative cultural events of the early twenty-first century in China, given it reflects encounters between Chinese and Western cultures, between elite and popular cultures, and between television and online cultures. The 2005 season of Super Girl Voice, produced and aired by Hunan Satellite TV (HNSTV), achieved remarkable national success. This is one of the most significant moments in the history of Chinese television because it triggered the first wave of popular reality talent shows (W. Sun, 2007, pp. 187-188). The early talent shows, represented by the ‘Super Girl’ phenomenon (chaonü xianxiang), destabilised the established cultural-political order from both industry and discursive aspects of television entertainment because they brought entertaining forms of amateur participation and popular voting into China. China’s talent shows have undergone a radical transformation in the past decade, during which the party-state’s regulators have had a serious confrontation against the ‘excessive entertainment’ (guodu yulehua) of television programmes. In the name of responding to public dissatisfaction with so-called ‘cultural vulgarity’, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) and its successor adopted a series of effective measures, from quantitative and qualitative macro-control to concrete content censorship of talent shows. These measures forced the genre to accommodate the dual needs of the party-state and the market, rather than imposing a traditionally simplified and extensive ban on the broadcasting of the genre. The party-state’s direct intervention resulted in the dramatic decline of talent shows from 2008 until 2010 when a new wave arrived, partly due to the introduction of a series of overseas formats such as Got Talent, The X Factor, The Voice, Idol and so on (Huang, 2014, pp. 145-146; L. Yang, 2013, p. 521).

In a broader sense, the official regulation and censorship of talent shows should be considered part of the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign. Since 2004,
with the development of media marketisation, authorities have issued a series of state policies and regulations to control the spectacular surge in television entertainment involving crime drama, dating shows, talent shows and so on (R. Bai, 2014a, p. 70; Yu Zhao, 2015, pp. 56-57). I argue that the campaign is a form of cultural-moral governance aimed not only at television entertainment itself but also at ideological struggles in the increasingly pluralistic society. The emergence and popularity of various television entertainment genres have sparked fierce ideological debate between scholars, policymakers, media practitioners and internet users. In the case of the ‘Super Girl’ phenomenon, intellectual debate mainly surrounds the aesthetic tastes and democratic values embedded in talent shows. While liberals have celebrated the cultural pluralism and civil society embedded in Super Girl Voice, conservative cultural elites have labelled the genre as ‘vulgar culture’ and the New Leftists demystified and criticised democratic principles reflected in the genre. I regard the party-state’s intervention in talent shows as a process of reaffirming its own cultural hegemony in the context of ideological struggles between different ideologies and forms of power. By colluding with the conservative cultural elites and New Left intellectuals, the SARFT deliberately employed a resilient ‘moral level’ to rectify the Western-inspired genre by satisfying both the party-state and the market. This policy has also resulted in chaos between public and entertainment discourses.

This chapter sets out to examine the remaking process of talent shows by placing it in the dynamic conflicts and negotiations between the party-state bureaucracy, the public, and television media institutions. It begins with a general survey of reality talent shows from 2004 to 2008 for commonalities in their formats, narratives and themes, with an analysis of how the emergence of the Western-inspired genre potentially constructed the party-dominated cultural-political order while adapting to the popular trends of global television entertainment. Then, the second and third sections focus on the detailed process of regulation and censorship of talent shows, at the same time analysing limitations of governance. The fourth section extends the understanding of such a governing process to the layer of the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign. To unveil the cultural-moral essence of the party-state’s intervention in talent shows and other television
entertainment genres, my analysis contextualises the campaign in a complex ideological struggle between the regime and different social coalitions from a macroscopic view during the ongoing deepening of marketisation. Finally, this chapter summarises new developments in terms of the discourse of talent shows under the dual stresses of state intervention and market mechanisms.

2.1 Decoding the ‘Super Girl’ phenomenon

Reality talent shows had their first popular wave in China from 2004 to 2008. The wave presented a new cultural landscape in which ordinary people were the focus of the public’s attention and home audiences became an important part of television entertainment content as active participation became available and popular. The Chinese media, public and scholars have widely realised a radical transformation in China’s television entertainment and called it the ‘Super Girl’ phenomenon. As the notion implies, the ‘Super Girl’ phenomenon attributes the first wave of the genre to the phenomenal talent show Super Girl Voice, and especially during its 2005 season. To understand how this Western-inspired genre affected the established cultural-political order, it is necessary to inductively analyse the general features shared by Super Girl Voice and other representative talent shows.

The story dates back to 2003, when HNETV (Hunan Economic TV), a leading local channel of HBS (Hunan Broadcasting System), broadcast Super Boy Voice (Chaoji nansheng, 2003). A year later, because of the success in Hunan Province’s local market, the nationwide satellite channel HNSTV (owned by HBS) introduced Super Girl Voice (2004–2006), a spin-off of the Super series. Around the same time, another provincial satellite channel SHDTV (Shanghai Dragon Television) produced My Show (Woxing woxiu, 2004–2009) in close cooperation with the Universal Music Group. In August 2004, when the first seasons of Super Girl Voice and My Show were drawing to an end, Dream China (Mengxiang Zhongguo, 2004–2006) started to air on CCTV. Considering the simultaneous emergence of these three high-profile singing talent shows, 2004 is commonly
regarded as ‘year one of China’s talent shows’ (Zhongguo de xuanxiu yuannian) (People, 2014). In their rivalry with My Show and Dream China in 2005, the second season of Super Girl Voice pushed the talent show genre to an unprecedented peak of China’s television entertainment in terms of cultural influences (Y. Huang, 2011; Lai, 2006), audience psychology (CUC, 2007), mass participation (L. Yang, 2009a, 2009b; L. Yang & Bao, 2012) and commercialisation mode (Jian & Liu, 2009; Keane et al., 2007). The remarkable nationwide success of Super Girl Voice resulted in about two dozen copycat programmes appearing on CCTV and other provincial satellite channels in the following two years. To challenge the dominance of Super Girl Voice, SHDTV launched another talent show in 2006 called My Hero (Jiayou! Hao nan’er, 2006–2007) for male contestants. Although the station marketed the show as selecting all-round male idols, singing was still the most important talent. In the following year, HNSTV aired the spin-off Happy Boy Voice (2007, 2010, 2013), a new talent show to compete with SHDTV’s two programmes My Hero and My Show. In 2008, when many satellite channels announced that they were suspending their well-known talent shows because of the Beijing Olympic Games and, more importantly, a series of party-state interventions, talent shows began cooling down.

Despite differences in programming structures and rules, the talent show genre during this period was primarily characterised by amateur competition and popular voting. The second season of Super Girl Voice is a solid example. It consisted of three stages: mass auditions (haixuan), five regional contests and a national grand contest. The whole programme lasted four months from April to August 2005. First, regional auditions were held in five ‘singing regions’ (changqu): Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Zhengzhou, Chengdu and Changsha, which are respectively the capital cities of five provinces: Guangdong, Zhejiang, Henan, Sichuan and Hunan. Next, judges selected 50 contestants from each singing region to take part in regional contests in which viewers could vote for their favourite contestants. Finally, the top three winners of the five regional contests became the 15 finalists of the national grand contest. Both the regional and national grand contests were broadcast live on HNSTV. According to the rules, one or three contestants would be eliminated every episode after the mass
auditions. The 2005 season of *Super Girl Voice* divided the decision-making power into three parts: a panel of judges, home audience members and a mass jury (*dazhong pingshen tuan*) of 31 live audience members. The show decided on the eliminated contestant following a face-off called PK (short for Player Kill) in which the two weakest contestants took part – one voted by the home audience through Short Messaging Service (SMS) and the other chosen by a panel of judges. In the PK stage, the two contestants sang a cappella and the mass jury voted live to decide which one would be eventually eliminated. In some cases, some members of the jury would say a few words to encourage contestants or provide suggestions before casting their votes in front of the public. The last episode of the national grand contest on 26th August 2005 drew over 280 million viewers (Huang, 2014, p. 142). The finalists for the title of grand champion of *Super Girl Voice* 2005 were Li Yuchun, Zhou Bichang and Zhang Liangying. Finally, Li Yuchun won with 3,538,308 votes and became the grand champion of the second season.

China’s reality talent shows from 2004 to 2008 share the following formulaic features with *Super Girl Voice*:

1. They often included mass auditions and elimination contests. In most cases, while mass auditions were pre-recorded and edited, shows broadcast elimination contests live. In some shows, elimination contests were divided into two stages: regional contests and a national grand contest. The regional contests would be held in four to six municipalities (*zhixia shi*) and provincial capitals. Provincial satellite channels would co-produce and co-broadcast regional contests with local television stations or channels. Each regional contest awarded one contestant with the title of champion. The best three to five contestants in each region could take part in the national grand contest.

2. Most talent shows centred around singing. Even if some programmes positioned themselves as variety talent shows, singing was still the main performance skill. The main singing style involved covers of popular songs. Except for a few contestants singing their own songs, most sang classic Chinese-language popular songs created by Hong Kong and Taiwanese musicians and even English-language popular songs.

3. Auditions were usually set in a small studio. One contestant or group introduced themselves and then performed in front of three or four judges. The judges had the right to decide whether the contestants could move on to the next round. In edited auditions, as a lot of the performances were very
unprofessional and even funny, judges often criticised them in a harsh and even satirical manner. This is seen as the selling point of the mass audition round.

4. The elimination stage of the talent shows often took place in a large studio with a live audience capacity in the hundreds. Most audience members were composed of cult fans. They carried posters of their idols, cheered and shouted their names before and after the performances and waved glow sticks while they sang. The varied decision-making processes of the elimination contests contained popular and/or judge voting. Television viewers at home always decided the grand champions.

5. Some talent shows were for either male or female contestants, but they were all open to the public as much as possible. The total number of participants could reach tens to hundreds of thousands, but most who reached the elimination contest were urban youth born in the 1980s – known as the ‘post-80s’ (balinghou). Their diversified personal images were shown in the talent shows themselves, other programmes and online rumours.

6. Talent shows often constructed a melodramatic narrative to portray the contestants as a group of young people pursuing their dreams. Although there have been rumours of rifts between contestants circulated online, on television they usually appeared to appreciate one another. Oftentimes, a talent show was even transformed into a ‘crying game’ as many contestants emotionally solicited votes from judges, live and television viewers (H. Xiao, 2006, p. 64). When a contestant was eliminated, it was part of the moral order that other rivals were supposed to show their sympathy to the public. Otherwise, the moral qualities of the surviving contestants would be discussed and even questioned by viewers through the internet.

The emergence and popularity of reality talent shows from 2004 to 2008 was a response to the developing neoliberal market economy in the 2000s. The talent show genre was a watershed for China’s television entertainment programmes because the established cultural-political pattern shifted into a more decentralised and pluralised media market in both industry and discursive layers. There have been two main factors that have further neoliberalised China. First, the rapid development of the internet has gradually complicated the situation of mass media and informed an interactive model to reconfigure the production and distribution relationship between media producers and consumers. Second, China’s television entertainment discourses have been Westernised along the lines of cultural globalisation. This Westernisation process was epitomised by the ensemble of talent shows in this period; the market mechanisms of television entertainment centred on audience ratings and advertising revenue, with a
constellation of transformations — from central to provincial media, from
television to the internet, from professionals to amateurs, from specialists to fans,
and from elites to grassroots — in various aspects of television entertainment.

Before the era of reality talent shows, televising artistic competitions in
China is dateable back to 1984 when CCTV launched the biennial National Young
Singers Grand Prix. Presenting itself as ‘the most authoritative’ and ‘the highest-
level’ national singing competition, this government-endorsed competition
emphasised the importance of professional skills standardised through academia
(xueyuan pai) by the means of expert judgement. Judges were often famous
composers, lyricists, professors and vocalists, some with official titles such as
chairman or vice-chairman of the Chinese Musicians’ Association or its local
affiliated associations. Contestants were divided into two groups: professional and
amateur, and since its second season each group has included three categories of
singing style: bel canto (meisheng changfa), folk style (minzu changfa) and
popular style (tongsu changfa). Many so-called amateur contestants had received
professional training and only qualified as an amateur participant because they
were not working in any artistic troupe during the competition (CNHUBEI, 2013).
As for the professional group, the contestants mainly came from state-owned and
military professional artistic troupes and conservatories. At the end of the
competition, official troupes recruited many of the excellent contestants. Some
have become well-known singers and artists, including Peng Liyuan, Zhang Ye,
Mao Amin, Yan Weiwen, Xie Xiaodong, Cai Guoqing and Tan Jing. In China,
they are often called gala singers (wanhui geshou) because they are famous for
stepping on the television stages like CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala and similar
programmes, rather than releasing albums in the market.

In contrast, the tremendous popularity of the genre marginalised the central
position of CCTV in the nationwide market of television entertainment to an
unprecedented degree. By virtue of its central position of the media industry,
CCTV has long grasped the right of discourse to occupy the centre of television
entertainment, as exemplified by the Spring Festival Gala. However, with the
commercialisation of the media industry, the party-state has encouraged the
expansion of media conglomerates on the premise of maintaining state-dominated ownership. More provincial television stations, in particular HNSTV and its *Super Girl Voice*, have challenged CCTV’s dominance. CCTV’s talent shows *Dream China* and *Avenue of Stars* (*Xingguang dadao*, 2004 to present) could not compete with their rivals on provincial satellite channels in terms of quality, quantity, popularity and influence.

Moreover, reality talent shows took advantage of the media convergence between television and the internet to extend the communicative model of television entertainment. This kind of cross-media cooperation was principally based on complementing their respective advantages. In the mid-2000s, China’s commercial portal websites had neither the right of journalistic gathering and editing nor the production capability of entertainment programmes. They therefore relied heavily on the programming resources of television media. Moreover, the producers of talent shows had to realise the change in audience structure caused by the development of the internet. Among the substantial population of online users, urban youths not only make up the main force of internet users, they are also the most important viewing group of talent shows. As a result, television media pinned their hope on improving the degree of audience engagement with talent shows by increasing related online exposure. If the talent shows had followed the old one-dimensional communicative pattern, they might have broadcast once weekly without enticing the audiences to engage actively in the shows. However, the juxtaposition of television and the internet has completely reshaped the interactive ways in which people watch television. For instance, with the broadcast of *Super Girl Voice* in 2005, HNSTV collaborated through four significant web portals: Sina, Sohu, Tencent and Netease; this allowed them to create specific webpages for the show. Other talent shows followed suit. The themed webpages mainly contained related entertainment news, articles by music critics, online forums, images and videos about the talent shows.

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and their contestants. Other products based on Web 2.0 principles, such as Sina Blog and Baidu Tieba, likewise became public discursive spaces with the explosion of a large amount of content surrounding *Super Girl Voice* and other talent shows. The success of HNSTV’s talent shows was inseparable from their online hype. An online user named Stage Designer (*wumeishi*), who described himself as a HNSTV staff member, played a key role in hyping *Super Girl Voice* and its spin-offs. This mysterious insider often spread rumours, predicted the competition, relayed anecdotes and scandals by writing blog articles, even accepting anonymous interviews and sending emails to other media outlets (Sina, 2006b). These online rumours and hype became part of watching and discussing the show, eventually influencing the contestants’ performances and the audiences’ attitudes towards them (H. Xiao, 2006, pp. 62-63).

Mass participation in talent shows presented a threat to the established performing cultural politics dominated by cultural bureaucrats, artistic elites, academic authorities, central media and official artistic troupes. The Western-inspired genre is characterised by neoliberal performing politics in which amateur participants are focal point of the public’s attention and television audiences participate in the star-making process of television entertainment and popular culture in multiple layers. In this, there are two core concerns regarding performing politics: who can perform on stage and who has the power to decide who can perform. These two points imply the reconfiguring potential of the relationships between amateur and professionals, as well as between ordinary audiences and specialists. They both manifest the cultural practices of mass participation including two aspects: participating in talent shows as performers and as judges (Carpentier, 2007, pp. 88-89).

Reality talent shows attempted to lower the entrance barrier to performing (*biaoyan menkan*), therefore blurring the distinction between amateurs and professionals. In fact, the entrance barrier of performing on television and other

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official media had long been reflected in a set of admission requirements that usually included education, background, personal image, performing experience, social relationships, all kinds of identities and so on. Such requirements were so strict that ordinary people were typically too far behind to catch up with professional performers. This hardship might be felt most strongly by a few talented amateurs whose abilities were as exceptional as those professionals. The existence of the performing thresholds confirmed the long-standing cultural hegemony co-dominated by the party-state and the elites. The popularity of the talent show genre marginalised the long-term dominant position of cultural elites, intellectuals, renowned artists and professional performers. The genre provided amateur performers with a precious platform for self-fulfilment. In the broader context of the social inequality that resulted (to a large extent) from the development of the market economy, the form of talent shows implied and symbolised the vision of ‘fairness, justice and openness’ (gongping, gongzheng and gongkai). Never has there been such a concentration of amateurs performing on China’s television as there are shown on talent shows. The Cinderella myth of neoliberalism further roused enormous enthusiasm for the participation of non-professionals in the genre. As the 2005 season of Super Girl Voice popularised, ‘as long as you love singing, any female can sign up, regardless of [your] singing style, age, appearance or origin’ (MGTV, 2005).

The slogan ‘Sing as You Want’ (xiangchang jiuchang) from Super Girl Voice created a brand-new atmosphere by placing individual desire above artistic professionalism. This is profoundly evidenced in the mass audition stage. What the auditions underlined was not some exquisite standard, but the candid revelations of different personalities. As mentioned before, broadcasting unprofessional, funny and hilarious performers – some of whom were called weirdos (qipa) – in the edited auditions even became one of the main selling points of some talent shows. For instance, in the 2005 season of Super Girl Voice, a 36-year-old contestant named Huang Xin appealed to the public because of her extremely exaggerated audition (ChinaDaily, 2005). She sang a 1980s-song called ‘My Beloved Hometown’ (Wo relian de guxiang) in a skintight red leather dress. In the audition, she was immersed in her own world, closing her eyes and shaking
her body, though she had a husky and slightly off-key voice. After singing, she repeatedly explained to the judges, with a forthright and sincere attitude, that the long journey had affected her performance. After this amusing audition aired, Huang Xin won thousands of fans overnight and became known online as the ‘red-dressed matriarch’ (hongyi jiaozhu). This was a grassroots victory. In the name of realness, the aesthetic trend against mainstream elitism presented a more inclusive and diversified discourse. In this context, the talent show genre abandoned the once common bureaucratic discourse.

While amateur performers stood under the spotlights, home audiences were engaged with taking part in the practical process of the entertainment programme, rather than only being a passive target to be entertained. This radically shifted their collective role from passive to active consumers. In the open mechanism of talent shows, they were encouraged to create and spread derivative content. In the 2005 season, for example, many well-known contestants formed their own fan groups, which grew as the season progressed. Their fan groups even invented special names to indicate their different identities. For example, the fans of the three most popular contestants, Li Yuchun, Zhou Bichang and Zhang Liangying, called themselves ‘Corn’ (yumi), ‘Pen-fan’ (bimi) and ‘Bean Jelly’ (liangfen), respectively. These names use two Chinese characters: the first, a homophone of some character in their idol’s name; the second, based on the Chinese word mi or fensi, or ‘fans’ in English. The fan groups took part in constructing talent show discourses, from the programme itself to online discussion. These active fans eventually became the key force behind the popularity of Super Girl Voice. They bridged the gap between producers, their idols and public opinion. In the studio, they could be a passionate live audience. Behind the scenes, they could be actively engaged in canvassing for their idols and producing and engaging on social media. The media producers were at the same time the most loyal consumers, and to the contestants, they were votes. From the perspective of media and record companies, the open stage of talent shows has never been an altruistic social service but a deliberate economic calculation. Television audiences act as the ‘focus group’ (Stahl, 2004, p. 217) and this free labour has replaced the position of specialists in determining the market potential of contestants.
2.2 Regulating talent shows from 2005 to 2016

While official and public opinion made a series of accusations about the vulgar content of the 2005 season of *Super Girl Voice*, the last few episodes yielded to more mainstream expression. The contestants were required to dress uniformly and avoid over-expressing their personalities. The director even asked one high-profile finalist, He Jie, to re-dye her reddish hair back to its original black (Huang, 2014, p. 144). In the grand finale of the season, the production team invited two respected veteran artists, Ma Yutao and Huang Wanqi, to sing with the last three finalists, and another group of artists to endorse the talent show in a short video. The three finalists, Li Yuchun, Zhou Bichang and Zhang Liangying, sang patriotic songs representing the official ideology, such as Guo Lanying’s ‘My Motherland’ (*Wode zuguo*) and Fei Xiang’s ‘The Clouds of My Hometown’ (*Guxiang de yun*). These adjustments at the end of the show were so negligible so as not to actually effect change regarding the stereotype of the talent show genre, which was inundated with negative news, crazy fans, SMS voting and sentimental plots. The fact that *Super Girl Voice* swept the country in 2005 reminded the regime of the cultural influence and social mobilisation capacity of television entertainment programmes and spurred the party-state to make a series of forceful interventions in the production and broadcasting of the genre in following years.

In January 2006, the SARFT issued a document titled ‘Key Points in the Work of Radio, Film and Television in 2006’. This document paid special attention to ‘further improving literature and arts, entertainment and emotional programmes in radio, film and television, focusing on upgrading quality, taste and style, and cleaning up the screen and voice’, as well as ‘adopting measures to solve the problems of the decrease of news, entertainment and excessive broadcast of television dramas on the main television and radio channels’.\(^{10}\) Considering the widespread and uncurbed popularity of talent shows in 2005, it is unsurprising that the genre became the most important target for the party-state’s

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regulation of television entertainment. In March 2006, the SARFT distributed a
specific circular on talent shows that specifically defined the genre as
‘competitive radio and television activities participated in by the masses’
(qunzhong canjia de xuanbaxing huodong) and imposed a series of restrictions on
their broadcast and content. For example, all participants must be 18 years old or
over; presenters and judges cannot attempt to please the public with claptrap;
judges cannot embarrass participants with hostile and impolite comments or use
flattery; regional contests cannot be broadcast on provincial satellite channels.11 In
addition, the 2006 document inaugurated a permission system for talent shows,
stipulating that television stations shall not produce and/or broadcast any talent
shows without the SARFT’s approval. By firmly seizing authority over approval
of the genre, the SARFT could effectively control the number and subject matter
of talent shows. While Dream China and My Show were approved one after the
other at the end of March that year, the focus was on whether the 2006 season of
Super Girl Voice would receive official approval (People, 2006a). On 12th April,
the SARFT issued the permit to the Radio, Film and Television Bureau of Hunan
Province, to which HNSTV is subordinate. The approval document asked the
provincial bureau to be responsible for supervising Super Girl Voice and
emphasised a set of principal guidelines about ‘actively representing the socialist
morality known as “Eight Honours and Disgraces”’ (barong bachi), ‘highlighting
the central theme of the times’ (shidai zhuxuanlü) and ‘adhering to principle of
the party character’ (jianchi dangxing yuanze).12 The permit also contained some
concrete production requirements to which the producers would adhere. For
example, the judging system should be a combination of voting via SMS and
expert evaluations; regional contests should be no more than five cities as in the
previous year; and the show should adopt time-delayed broadcasting in order to
avoid any irreversible fault. In addition, the SARFT did not approve another

11 The document is titled ‘Guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang guangbo dianshi bochu jigou canyu, zhuban huo bochu
quanguoxing huodong guanli de tongzhi’ [Circular on Further Strengthening
the Regulation of Nationwide or Cross-Provincial (Automatic Regional or Municipal) Competitions
Participated, Hosted or Broadcasted by Radio and Television Institutions]. Available at:

12 The document is titled ‘Guanyu tongyi hunan dianshitai juban chaoji nvsheng de pifu’ [Approval for
Super Girl Voice Hosted by Hunan Television]. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2006-
04/13/content_252695.htm (last accessed 17 April 2019).
HNSTV’s application to host *Super Boy Voice* as a spin-off of its popular *Super Girl Voice* series.

In 2007, the SARFT further strengthened the regulation of reality talent shows. At the Annual National Meeting of Broadcast Bureau Chiefs hosted in January, Wang Taihua, then-director of the SARFT, made a pledge to launch a new round of the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign to ‘resolutely resist the vulgar wind’. The talent show genre was a primary target in his speech. He said that there was an excessive amount of talent shows, and asserted that some of them had vulgar details. That year, HNSTV planned to produce a new season of *Super Boy Voice*. However, throughout the course of applying for the official permit, the SARFT asked the production team to change the name of the show (NetEase, 2007). Although the exact reason was not disclosed, it is speculated that it was because the term ‘super’ (*chaoji*) was too indicative of individualism. To obtain the SARFT’s approval, HNSTV had to give up its Chinese brand *chaoji*, eventually renaming the show *Happy Boys Voice* (*Kuaile nansheng*) in Chinese (though its official English name was still *Super Boys Voice*) as a compromise. It responded not only to the core concept of ‘Happy China’ (*Kuaile Zhongguo*) that HNSTV had aligned with since 2004 but also to the official narrative of constructing a ‘harmonious society’ proposed by Hu Jintao that same year. In early April, the SARFT approved the 2007 season of *Happy Boy Voice*. Based on the requirements for the 2006 season of *Super Girl Voice*, this approval document called for avoiding picturing ‘eliminated contestants in tears’ and ‘fans with out-of-control moods’. In August, the SARFT ended a talent show named *The First Heartthrob* that aired on CQTV (Chongqing Satellite Channel) because of vulgar and sensational plotting. The ban criticised CQTV for ‘being utterly irresponsible for live broadcast’ and ‘giving up the responsibility of the broadcaster’. In

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15 The official news is titled ‘Guangdian zongju tong bao Chongqing dianshitai “Diyici xindong” yanzhong weigui’ [SARFT Issues a Notice about Chongqing TV’s Serious Violations of Rules in The First Heartthrob].
September, the SARFT issued a new ‘Circular on Further Strengthening the Regulation of Competitive Radio and Television Activities Participated in by the Masses’. It had several stipulations: that all talent shows must apply for permits to the SARFT at least three months in advance; that all provincial satellite channels be allowed to broadcast only one talent show every year; that every talent show cannot last more than two months; that the number of episodes broadcast be ten or fewer and each episode last no longer than 90 minutes; and finally, that all satellite channels not schedule talent shows in the prime-time slot of 7:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.\(^{16}\) Aside from these detailed rules regarding broadcasting outlets, the 2007 circular also imposed a series of restrictions on the format of talent shows such as that talent shows shall not be designed to vote via SMS, telephone or the internet; live audience voting is allowed but the production team shall follow the principle of fairness, justice and openness not to mislead their decisions. Moreover, non-performing content, such as presenters’ lines, judges’ comments and fans’ emotional expressions, shall not exceed 20 percent of the whole episode, and the proportion of Chinese-language songs performed should be at least 75 percent.

The 2007 circular was an important supplement to the earlier 2006 document. Together, they established a set of detailed and complete rules that thoroughly regulated talent shows. Because of the SARFT’s crackdown, along with audience fatigue and the Beijing Olympic Games, reality talent shows cooled down, especially as HNSTV announced in 2008 that it would no longer produce them (Sina, 2008b). As several media outlets have noted, 2008 was a turning point in television talent shows (People, 2007). HNSTV produced and broadcast *Happy Girl Voice* and *Happy Boy Voice* in 2009 and 2010, respectively, but they were hardly comparable to the unprecedented popularity of earlier talent shows. Although the government abolished the 2006 and 2007 documents officially in

\(^{16}\)The document is titled ‘Jinyibu jiaqiang qunzhong canyu de xuanba lei guangbo dianshi huodong he jiemu guanli de tongzhi’ [Circular on Further Strengthening the Regulation of Competitive Radio and Television Activities participated in by the Masses]. Gov.cn. Available at: [http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2007-09/21/content_757330.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2007-09/21/content_757330.htm) (last accessed 17 April 2019).
January 2009, the SARFT still proposed a set of detailed and specific requirements for the shows in their approval documents. For example, in the 2009 season of *Happy Girl Voice*, the entire show, from mass auditions to the finale, had to finish within two and half months. Other stipulations included that voting via SMS was completely prohibited; the number of episodes aired live must not exceed ten and each episode must be shorter than 90 minutes; and the show had to be scheduled after 10:30 p.m. (CRI, 2009).

Along with the recession of talent shows came the rise of reality dating shows. Dating shows replaced talent shows as the most popular genre of television entertainment and then, in 2008 and 2009, they became the main target of SARFT regulation (R. Bai, 2014a, p. 78; Yu Zhao, 2015, pp. 58-59). From the SARFT’s perspective, one wave had only just subsided when another rose. Although the administrative division saw success in curbing talent shows, the vulgarity problem of reality dating shows excessively violated the high moral pursuit of the party-state. In 2010, the first season of *If You Are the One* aired on JSTV (Jiangsu Satellite TV), causing a series of controversies. Ma Nuo, a female contestant, said to a male contestant: ‘I would rather cry in a BMW than smile on a bicycle.’ This notorious line swiftly became an online sensation. On 23rd July 2010, President Hu Jintao delivered a speech in a politburo meeting about deepening the market reform of the cultural system. He emphasised that ‘cultural workers and cultural units should consciously stick to the system of core socialist values and the forward direction of socialist advanced culture, and resolutely resist the tendencies of vulgarity (*yongsu*), low character (*disu*) and kitsch (*meisu*).’ These three features are collectively called the ‘three vulgarities’ (*sansu*). This was the first time that President Hu openly expressed his position on the trend of cultural vulgarity since the launch of the ‘Clean up the Screen’

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campaign in 2004 (Yu Zhao, 2015, p. 57). Hu’s speech heralded a top-down anti-vulgarity movement and imbued the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign with unprecedented power.

In September 2011, because Happy Girl Voice had violated the approval document several times, such as by broadcasting live outside the permitted time and awarding over-expensive prizes to home audiences, the SARFT banned HNSTV from airing any talent shows at all in 2012 (People, 2011). The SARFT not only set an example as a warning to other television stations, but it also issued a directive in October 2011 titled ‘Opinions on Further Strengthening the Regulation of Television Programmes on General Interest Satellite Channels’.19 This is widely known as the ‘curb the entertainment rules’ (xianyu ling) document (R. Bai, 2014a, p. 79). Its purpose was to curb the trend of excessive entertainment on the 34 general interest satellite channels, rather than only targeting talent shows or dating shows.

The term ‘general interest satellite channels’ (shangxing zonghe pindao) is a new concept. It includes all provincial satellite channels and CCTV 1 but excludes other specific satellite channels of CCTV. The ‘Opinions’ defined the nature of the ensemble of general interest satellite channels as centred on press propaganda. The SARFT started to adopt macro-control measures to limit the total number of seven popular entertainment genres: dating shows, talent shows, tabloid talk shows, game shows, variety shows, interview chat shows and reality shows. It also aimed to increase the number of news programmes. According to the document, the total number of these seven genres on all general interest satellite channels would not exceed nine between 7:30 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. every day of the week, and each channel would be allowed to broadcast no more than two programmes from these seven genres every week. Every entertainment show between 7:30 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. would also not run for more than 90 minutes.

Moreover, the detailed rules also said that each satellite channel must air at least two hours of news programmes between 6:00 a.m. and 12:00 a.m. and at least two news programmes, lasting at least 30 minutes each, between 6:00 p.m. and 11:30 p.m. Each satellite channel must launch a ‘morality building programme’ (daode jianshe jiemu) to propagate Chinese traditional virtues and the system of core socialist values. In addition, the ‘curb the entertainment rules’ stipulated that all general interest satellite channels shall implement an application and record filing system for importing formats from new overseas television programmes. The rules further declare that local Radio, Film and Television Bureaus were responsible for censoring the backgrounds of overseas production institutions, their formats and their content. In this process, the SARFT would oversee the number, proportion and subject matter of overseas television formats to prevent the over-concentration in specific regions, genres or content. Besides the above restrictions, the SARFT also established a new award policy to select the Top Ten Creative and Excellent Television Programmes and the Top Ten Outstanding Television Programmes each year, beginning in 2012.

In the wake of the 2011 document’s launch, the programming arrangements made by general interest satellite channels in early 2012 met the targets anticipated by the SARFT to a large extent. According to the official statistics, the total broadcasting time for daily news programmes amounted to 89 hours across 193 titles, having seen a 33 percent increase on the previous year. Moreover, the number of programmes broadcast across the seven targeted entertainment genres decreased by 69 percent, or from 126 a week in the previous year to 38. Even so, the 2011 document by no means curbed the development of reality talent shows; instead, it almost coincided with a new boost in the genre’s popularity. In contrast to the copycat feature of talent shows from 2004 to 2008, as exemplified by Super

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21 The official news is titled ‘Weishi zonghe pindao yule jiemu jian 2/3, guodu yule qingxiang bei ezhi’ [Entertainment Programmes on General Interest Satellite Channels Decrease 2/3, Excessive Entertainment Keeps Down]. Gov.cn. Available at: [http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2012-01/03/content_2036093.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2012-01/03/content_2036093.htm) (last accessed 17 April 2019).
Girl Voice, the purchase of a series of globally popular talent-search franchises triggered a new wave of talent shows.

In 2010, SHDTV, along with the two British companies Fremantle Media and Syno Entertainment, co-produced and broadcast China’s Got Talent (Zhongguo daren xiu). Despite prohibiting audience voting systems, this variety talent show demonstrated that the genre could still flourish by featuring ‘carefully planned and well-produced’ programming effects (L. Yang, 2013, pp. 521-522). Besides the imported Got Talent franchise, the famous talent-search formats The X Factor, The Voice and Idol were also imported to China’s television entertainment market in succession. LNTV (Liaoning Satellite TV) broadcast two seasons of The X Factor: Singing Passionately (Jiqing changxiang) in 2011 and 2012 and then transferred ownership of the X Factor franchise to HNSTV in 2013, where it was renamed The X Factor: China’s Strongest Voice (Zhongguo zuiqiang yin). In 2012, The Voice of China (Zhongguo hao shengyin) premiered on ZJSTV (Zhejiang Satellite Channel) and immediately grabbed the nation’s attention, exhibiting notably high audience ratings and pervasive online discussions. Several big-budget talent shows ran throughout 2013. At the beginning of that year, HNSTV launched I Am a Singer, a singing competition show for talented veteran singers based on the format of the same name in South Korea. Because several pop stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan took part in the show, it was a sensation not only in Mainland China but also in these two Chinese-language regions. In May 2013, SHDTV first aired Chinese Idol (Zhongguo meng zhi sheng) based on the Idol format. Sooner after, HNSTV’s conventional Happy Boy Voice and ZJSTV’s The Voice of China (Season 2) successively became engaged in a ratings battle for singing talent shows in the national television market. At the end of that year, China’s Got Talent aired its fifth season.

The sharp re-emergence of talent-search programmes, in particular singing shows, once again seized the attention of party-state regulators. In July 2013, the General Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), SARFT’s successor, held an emergency meeting with the directors of nine satellite channels to discuss the problem of surplus singing talent shows –
soon after, it issued a document known as the ‘curb the song rules’ (xiange ling).\textsuperscript{22} The document pointed out that the number of singing talent shows was excessive and their formats presented similar problems of extravagance. Hence, based on the requirement that all television stations shall not invest in producing any new singing talent shows in the following months of that year, the SAPPRFT capped the number of talent shows and the amount of broadcasting time for the genre. There would have been nine shows of the genre on nationwide satellite channels in the third season of that year. According to the document, two shows were dissolved and seven were reserved or delayed. Among these, \textit{China’s Red Song Show} (\textit{Zhongguo hongge hui}) aired on JXTV (Jiangxi Satellite TV) was asked not to renew again in July and August because it intensively broadcast 13 episodes from 10\textsuperscript{th} to 22\textsuperscript{nd} July. The talent show team had to adjust its original plan to broadcast its finale two months later on 30\textsuperscript{th} September. In addition, \textit{Blossoming Flowers}, planned for broadcast on QHTV (Qinghai Satellite TV) in November, was abandoned. Broadcasts of CCTV’s \textit{Dream Stars’ Partner} and JSTV’s \textit{Celebrity Battle} were delayed until the fourth season of that year. This macro-control retained the three high-profile singing shows – \textit{The Voice of China}, \textit{Chinese Idol} and \textit{Happy Boys Voice}. Unlike its two rivals, \textit{Happy Boys Voice} was not permitted to air in the prime-time slot.

In October 2013, the SAPPRFT issued a ‘Circular on Doing a Good Job of the Arrangement and Registration of Television Programmes on General Interest Satellite Channels in 2014’.\textsuperscript{23} The supplement of the 2011 document is informally called the ‘curb the entertainment rules 2.0’ document. It concentrates on the serious homogenisation of television entertainment to curb the number of programmes using foreign formats, big-budget television galas and singing talent shows. Meanwhile, the 2013 document encouraged domestic documentaries and animation. Conclusively, all singing television competitions must be approved by

\textsuperscript{22} The document is titled ‘Guanyu jinyibu guifan gechanglei xuanba jiemu de tongzhi’ [Circular on Further Regulating Singing Competitive Shows]. Gov.cn. Available at: \url{http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2013-07/29/content_2457001.htm} (last accessed 17 April 2019).

\textsuperscript{23} The official news is titled ‘Xinwen chuban guangdian zongjiu jiangdui tongzhihu daeng jiemu jinxing hongguan tiaokong’ [SAPPRFT to Take Macro-Control Measures on Homogenous Programmes]. Gov.cn October 22, 2010. Available at: \url{http://www.gov.cn/gzdt///2013-10/22/content_2511856.htm} (last accessed 17 April 2019).
the SAPPRFT and only one programme of this genre every season shall be broadcast during the prime-time slot. Another target of the regulation was the severe deficiency of television creativity and television’s over-dependence on overseas programming formats. Indeed, most popular singing talent shows after 2010 were based on franchises from overseas. The 2013 document stipulated that every general interest satellite channel must air no more than one programme based on an overseas format.

In 2014 and 2015, without the arrival of any new high-profile singing talent shows, *The Voice of China* and *I Am a Singer* maintained their leading positions in the highly competitive market of television entertainment. However, for different external reasons, these two shows (with structures based on foreign franchises) had to rebrand in 2016 and 2017, respectively. First, Canxing Production, producer of *The Voice of China*, failed to renew the licence with Dutch TV producer Talpa Holding, which was the original pioneer of The Voice format. Talpa Holding turned over the Chinese franchise to Talent Production on a new contract. The original team of *The Voice of China*, ZJSTV and Canxing Production, co-produced a rebranded the talent show *Sing! China (Zhongguo xin gesheng, literally China’s new singing voice)*, giving up the old name and changing the format of blind auditions from rotating red chairs to sliding boards. Moreover, as the deployment of the THAAD missile defence system intensified the tension between China and South Korea, there was an unofficial message that Korean brands and artists were banned. The ban is known informally as the ‘curb the Korean rules’ (*xianhan ling*). The message spread widely across the two countries until the end of 2017 (BBC, 2017). Although a spokesperson from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China denied tightening up its restrictions on South Korean pop culture in China’s media, ²⁴ HNSTV certainly changed *I Am a Singer* to *Singer 2017* to avoid highlighting the show’s Korean branding background.

2.3 The limitations of the party-state’s censorship and regulation

At the time of writing, the second wave of talent shows in China has declined to a moderate degree such that the genre is not as popular as at its peak, but it is still one of the most widely broadcast entertainment genres. China’s talent shows have experienced two waves, from *Super Girl Voice* to *The Voice of China* and *I Am a Singer*. During this process, the SARFT’s intervention has remade this Western-inspired genre to accommodate China’s cultural-political situation. The process of regulating talent shows requires further in-depth analysis as it reflects the ways in which the party-state’s cultural governance echoes the new situations of sociocultural development, provides a glimpse into understanding the back and forth negotiation between the state and media institutions, and discloses the official attitudes towards television entertainment culture in reaction to cultural globalisation and media digitalisation.

SARFT’s documents always accused talent shows and corresponding media of being ‘excessive’ (*guosheng* or *guodu*) as a starting point or pretext for extending its tendrils of control over the entertainment industry. In fact, it is difficult to forge a consensus between the state and the market on determining the nature of ‘excessive entertainment’ because ‘excessive’ is a rather subjective concept or a kind of moral judgement. In a written statement about the 2011 document, an anonymous spokesperson from the SARFT claimed that the problem of excessive entertainment in television programmes was not simply directed at a certain genre, but at the creative tendency in the industry as a whole. The spokesperson proposed four principles for determining excessive entertainment: function, element, effect and total amount. First, the CPC considers broadcasting in China to be the mouthpiece of the party and the people, so its main function must always be propaganda and education. The result is that

aesthetic taste into entertainment. Second, some non-entertainment programmes contain excessive entertaining elements and detract from their original themes. Third, some programmes have a negative effect upon their audience because they are aimed only attracting audiences to boost viewership so as to neglect culturally political correctness. Fourth, while entertainment programmes are put together to air in a given prime-time slot, the total amount reflects the trend of excessive entertainment. In the regulators’ view, the media market has by no means been blameless because it is full of excessive, homogenous and vulgar entertainment. The official stance is that the development of talent shows in the past decade epitomises the vicious and even regressive media competition in which audience ratings have become a primary standard for measuring success. In the pursuit of transforming the viewers’ attention to commercial interests, mass media have produced an excess of talent shows whose content constantly touched the bottom line of the party-state in terms of quality and quantity. At the same time, when some television channel released a successful television entertainment programme in the market, other media institutions scrambled to imitate it, generating a multitude of similar programmes. This trend has emerged repeatedly in different forms, such as copying or buying franchises, reflecting not only the homogeneity of talent shows in different stages but also the serious lack of media creativity.

With the spectacular growth of media conglomerates, the SARFT’s regulation and censorship of talent shows has been aimed at ensuring the genre can evolve in line with party-state needs. These needs project two main aspects. First, talent shows cannot become a kind of cultural form or symbol against the party-state ideological discourse. In other words, the competitive features embedded in the formats of talent shows cannot act as an incentive for intensifying social contradictions resulting from social polarisation in terms of income, availability of opportunities and geographical and ethnic socio-economic levels. At the same time, the democratic implication of the Western-inspired genre, such as mass participation and audience voting, should be weakened and even avoided to associate it with the status quo of the one-party authoritarian system. The second aspect is that the talent show genre has overly relied on the creativity of foreign franchises. The Western-inspired genre has been so popular that it has
decentralised party-state discourse. This cultural trade imbalance has obviously struck a discordant note with the party-state expectation that state-owned media enterprises should shoulder the responsibility of implementing the ‘cultural going out’ strategy, which is an official policy of promoting party-sanctioned Chinese culture. These party-state needs have compelled regulators to restore the educational and propaganda function of domestic television entertainment. During the re-establishment and reaffirmation of cultural hegemony, the SARFT did not use its power to establish a fairer media market, but neatly used its authority to exert influence over media institutions and their talent shows. The cultural governing targets of the SARFT and the subsequent SAPPRFT primarily contained the following interwoven layers: the talent show producers, genre and talent shows themselves. By issuing a series of orders, directives and regulations within its jurisdiction, the SARFT has undertaken the responsibility for rectifying the genre to fall in line with the official ideological track.

As such, three aspects of the governing limitations in regulating the talent show genre require further discussion. First, from a diachronic perspective, regulating talent shows in this decade was a periodic and repeated governing process during which the SARFT and mass media bargained in the context of an inhibiting and anti-inhibiting relationship. Ruoyun Bai (2014a) thinks that such a cultural governing model may be effective in the short term, but if excessive entertainment is a fundamental problem in China’s media market it cannot be solved at ground level (pp. 80-81). The administrative measures for regulating talent shows were often temporary arrangements instead of law as the regulators always declared that their regulation and censorship were aimed at responding to public opinion during that time. At the beginning of every year, the SARFT proposed a bundle of concrete requirements for various television programmes including the talent show genre for the next twelve months. Moreover, the SARFT firmly held the approval authority in its grip to exercise effective control over specific talent shows and their producers. Besides taking these preventive measures, the party-state also actively dealt with emergency violations whenever the regulators deemed it necessary. The detailed governing tools also included immediately halting the broadcast of shows that did not comply with the official
ideology, issuing administrative warnings, admonishing local media officials and banning the production and broadcast of shows against SARFT’s rules for the next year. This kind of multipronged approach could adequately satisfy official needs, penetrating different targeted layers, including media institutions, programming genres, specific programmes and discourses. This means that the destinies of specific talent shows, or even the genre itself, were dependent on the market but also on the SARFT’s attitudes. However, expedients in the name of moral regulations cannot cope with the underlying controversy between market mechanisms and party-state needs in which the production and distribution of China’s talent shows are located. Ruoyun Bai (2014a) suggests that the SARFT’s responses to excessive entertainment, as exemplified in the popularity of reality talent shows, are so ‘reactive’ that similar problems can recur in different forms (pp. 80-81). Because the party-state cultural-moral governance is geared more towards genre, discourse and content, rather than improving the law system and building an effective industry self-discipline mechanism, the problem of excessive entertainment has made repeated comebacks despite the sustained presence of the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign. Curbing some genres of television entertainment instead provides the opportunity to incubate another. The 2004 ban on crime drama led to the popularity of talent shows and the decline of talent shows was immediately adjacent to the emergence of reality dating shows as intensely popular programmes. With the enforcement of the ‘curb the entertainment rules’ in 2011, local civic news (minsheng xinwen), under the veil of the news programme genre, has become increasingly tabloid-like and sensational, while entertainment programmes have taken on profound meaning to cater to the party-state’s farfetched tastes. In this way, regulating reality talent shows has not only become part of the genre itself, but also involved the whole of television’s ecological system.

The second governing limitation is mainly reflected in the lack of transparency and consistency over how the SARFT enacted the regulations on talent shows. According to the official statement regarding the drafting process of the 2011 document, the ‘curb the entertainment rules’ were a response to a
petition by a larger number of viewers. The SARFT listened to views expressed by various sections of society and carried out in-depth research to analyse the broadcasting status quo of general interest satellite channels at that time. It also committed to a detailed statistical analysis of the content, time slots and duration of news and entertainment programmes. During the drafting process, the SARFT held several symposia to solicit the opinions of local bureaus and television stations. Meanwhile, by conducting investigations, interviews and collecting online feedback, the SARFT gathered suggestions from representatives of audiences, industry personalities, media scholars and relevant government agencies. After six months of discussions and ten sets of modifications, the ‘curb the entertainment rules’ were eventually enacted and issued. In comparison, the SARFT rapidly issued the 2013 document following its emergency meeting with television institutions. At the same time, the procedural randomness of formulating the rules or related policies cast a shadow on the SARFT’s regulation of television entertainment. It was paradoxical that the regulators imposing rules and their corresponding processes lacked the restraint of an established law or rule about the party-state governance of mass media. The top-down paternalistic governing mode is based on the affiliation between the party-state and state-owned television stations or media conglomerates. In particular, there is no separate media guild independent of the party-state, so mass media cannot establish an effective self-disciplined industry rule and lobby the SARFT in its collective interests. The SARFT has therefore not guaranteed the needs of the media market, but rather it has adapted itself to changing circumstances to inhibit the popularity of talent shows to a moderate degree.

The third limitation of governance of the entertainment industry is the lack of transparency and consistency makes the party-state regulations vulnerable to accusations of bias or exchange of interests. Some scholars criticise the SARFT’s regulation and censorship, especially in the 2011 ‘curb the entertainment rules’, for its simplicity and rough implementation along the lines of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ (yidaogqie) approach, as well as for SARFT’s demonstrated intent to use mass

26 ibid.
media as an ideological tool for maintaining social stability (Long & Zhao, 2013, p. 65; Yu Zhao, 2015, p. 57). However, I argue that the SARFT’s regulators did not simply regard the media market as a monolithic entity. The *de facto* differential treatment in the course of cultural-moral governance has further aggravated unfair market competition in two primary ways: between CCTV and provincial satellite channels, and between strong and weak provincial satellite channels. Some of the talent show regulations were obviously targeted at provincial satellite channels, which is equivalent to protecting CCTV. To a large extent, CCTV has been the prime beneficiary of the regulation of so-called excessive entertainment. For example, the 2011 ‘curb the entertainment rules’ document exempted most CCTV channels from regulation using the introduction of the new concept of ‘general interest satellite channels’. This sort of open and official bias towards CCTV repeatedly adjusted and controlled the influence of provincial rivals from talent shows to dating shows, eventually consolidating the central and leading position of CCTV in the national media market.

The measures taken since 2011 have further widened the competitive gap between strong and weak provincial satellite channels. The SARFT has adopted strict measures for regulating the content and forms of talent shows and controlling their total number, but most high-profile talent shows produced by the top-tier provincial satellite channels have consistently received approvals for production and broadcast, except for the 2012 ban on HNSTV’s *Super* series. For example, as mentioned before, in July 2013, the SAPPRFT held an emergency working conference with the producers of CCTV and the main provincial media to cut the number of singing talent shows airing in the third season of the year. Three top-tier provincial satellite channels ZJSTV, SHDTV and HNSTV became the biggest beneficiaries chiefly because the SAPPRFT permitted them to retain high-profile singing talent shows, including *The Voice of China*, *Chinese Idol* and *Happy Boys Voice* respectively. At the same time, other talent shows had to be delayed or cancelled. Later that year, the SAPPRFT began further limiting the import of overseas franchises. The state intervention was seemingly aimed to restrain the influence of foreign entertainment culture. Instead, it led to several talent shows based on overseas franchises, such as *The Voice of China* and *I Am a
Singer, dominating the national market due to lack of competition from similar entertainment programmes. Eventually, the cultural regulations in the name of curbing entertainment actually assisted in the growth and monopoly of few entertainment media conglomerates. While market competition decides the popularity of different talent shows, the party-state firmly holds the power of life and death over the shows and their corresponding production and broadcast media. What China’s entertainment media is facing is the dichotomy of simultaneously remaining in favour with the state and the market. Therefore, talent shows should strictly comply with the SARFT’s regulations and cater to the mainstream ideology to gain official approval, which is an exchange of interests between the state and media. In this regard, there are two significant aspects of the second wave of China’s talent shows. First, talent shows employed dream-related discourse as a symbolic agent between the national grand narrative and personal stories, integrating traditional culture and socialist morality with market values to present a harmonic appearance of peace and prosperity (see Chapter 3). Second, state-owned commercialised media have exhibited their intention of dominating the Chinese cultural-linguistic market by cooperating with different professional artistic and entertainment communities, such as ‘Chinese-language pop music arena’ (huayu liuxing yuetan), to create professional talent shows (see Chapter 4).

To summarise, reality talent shows have experienced two waves during which the interplay of the state and media has remade the genre to accommodate China’s cultural-political context. As the Western-inspired genre was targeted for undermining established cultural politics and deviating away from mainstream values, the SARFT’s censorship and regulation of talent shows was not an isolated cultural governing process but part of wider cultural-moral governance engaged in conflicts and negotiations with different ideologies and corresponding forms of social power. How did the party-state regulation and censorship provide evidence for the complicated ideological struggles? How did intellectuals and ordinary viewers understand the state intervention in talent shows? How has the debate between the state and the public made and remade the moral boundaries of Chinese society? In the next section, I attempt to answer these questions by contextualising the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign in the conflicts and
negotiations with public discourses surrounding the popularity of talent shows that have been associated with the label of ‘excessive entertainment’.

2.4 From ideological struggle to cultural-moral governance: Contextualising the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign

The history of the People’s Republic of China is characterised by a series of cultural-political campaigns, such as the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign of the early 1980s and the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalisation Campaign of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Together, these demonstrate a long-term and continuous process of ideological conflict and negotiation between the party-state and the public. During the process, reaching a consensus on the definition and judgement of cultural attributes for various forms of social power in any given period seems unlikely. What is certain is that the party-state has found it increasingly difficult to valorise its own cultural heritage with the development and penetration of marketisation since the 1980s. At the same time, other social sectors have been more active in promoting cultural diversity. On the market economy stage, the party-state ideological discourse has been loosened increasingly by the flux of Western universal values, as well as the expansion of grassroots voices based in the technology of the internet since the beginning of the new century.

Against this background, the SARFT has carried out the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign under the auspices of the CPC’s Central Propaganda Department. Ruoyun Bai (2014a) defines the campaign as ‘an ensemble of state policies, regulations and actions aimed at reining in the spectacular rise of entertainment television since the late 1990s’ (p. 69). The campaign has been ongoing since 2002 when authorities originally contextualised it as ‘constructing a good public opinion atmosphere for the Sixteenth National Party Congress’ of the year (Sina, 2002). During the decade of President Hu Jintao’s leadership from 2002 to 2012, as reality talent shows and dating shows surged one after the other with the commercialisation of the media industry, the ‘Clean up the Screen’ initiative played a vital role in the state intervention in the production and
distribution of television entertainment. In February 2004, the Party Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued a document titled ‘Some Opinions on Further Improving Moral Education for Minors’. This document mandated the creation of a social atmosphere conducive to moral education for children and adolescents and purification of their growth environment; the document emphasised the significance of mass media in the process. In the same year, the SARFT started a new round of the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign by issuing a series of documents to regulate online games, crime dramas, cartoons, overseas programmes and television advertisements. From the party-state’s perspective, tarnished screens were evidence of the decentralisation of authoritarian politics induced by the neoliberalised market place in China. Thus, the subsequent censorship and regulation of reality talent shows should be regarded as part of the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign, rather than being shrugged off as an isolated cultural governing event. Ruoyun Bai (2014b) contextualises the campaign in three crises: the party’s governance crisis, the moral crisis in the market economy and the media ecological crisis (pp. 109-115). The crisis discourse reflects not only the party-state’s attitude towards the rise of television entertainment but also its deep anxiety for its own declining cultural hegemony.

From a broader perspective, the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign was not so much a series of crises, but rather struggles between different sides. As the market diversifies social values, the party-state must constantly reaffirm its cultural hegemony within the public sphere. In other words, the essence of the campaign, as exemplified by authorities regulating talent shows in the name of immoral excessive entertainment, is a process of ideological struggle rooted in the self-contradiction of the socialist market economy. This is because of China’s mixed political economy that integrates authoritarian centralised control and neoliberal elements (Yuezhi Zhao, 2008, p. 5). During the campaign, the SARFT’s documents were always aimed at ‘maintaining the right direction of public

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27The document is titled ‘Zhonggong zhongyang guowuyuan guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang he gaijin weichengnianren sixiang daode jianshe de ruogan yijian’ [Some Opinions on Further Improving Moral Education for Minors Issued by the Party Central Committee and the State Council]. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2004/content_62719.htm (last accessed 17 April 2019).
opinion’ in the name of responding to the public’s demands and expectations for a healthier media environment. The official rationale reflected by its own governing aim is not only television entertainment but also rectification of the ideological order. The campaign’s governing strategy is therefore a combination of ‘governing culture’ and ‘governing society through culture’. Therefore, to understand the ongoing progress of the campaign, it is necessary to gain an insight into the focal points of the public debate embedded in the ideological struggle between party-state and market.

There was an intellectual public debate surrounding the ‘Super Girl’ phenomenon. The debate echoed the transformation of China’s television entertainment engendered by talent shows. Its participants included not only famous scholars and media practitioners but also ordinary internet users. Their positions were articulated in television programmes, newspapers and the internet in media interviews, news coverage, commentaries, online comments and symposium addresses (Y. Huang, 2011; Wu, 2011, 2012, 2014). Two aspects of the discussions were interwoven with the cultural evaluation of talent shows from two different factors of influence: marketisation and democratisation (Y. Huang, 2011).

First, many intellectuals criticised Super Girl Voice and other talent shows owing to the nature of marketised media and the related vulgarity (Y. Huang, 2011). The term ‘vulgarity’ (disu) is not an absolute but a relative aesthetic evaluation. Opposite to the official or elite culture (guan wenhua or jingying wenhua), the term ‘vulgar culture’ (disu wenhua) refers to the cultural taste of talent shows being out of control and far from the designs of the party-state and its values. One of the most representative criticisms comes from Liu Zhongde, former minister of the China Culture Division. He strongly accused Super Girl Voice and other talent shows of vulgar content, and advocated for urgent state intervention (Martinsen, 2006). Liu said that to avoid negative influences on Chinese society, the state should not haphazardly throw cultural products into market mechanisms as if they were material products (Sina, 2006a).
In a symposium titled ‘Anti-vulgarisation in entertainment programmes’, organised by the Committee of Anchors and Hosts of Radio and Television of the Chinese Radio and Television Association, Cui Yongyuan, a well-known talk show host at CCTV, proposed a well-known viewpoint that ‘audience ratings are the root of all evil’ (shoushilü shi wan’e zhiyuan). The symposium thereafter reached a consensus with his media colleagues (People, 2005b). In an interview, Li Yong contended that CCTV’s talent show programme Dream China hosted by himself and produced by his wife Ha Wen was aimed only at building a platform on which ordinary people are able to realise their dreams, rather than pursuing commercial success (People, 2005c).

While CCTV’s media practitioners claimed that the viewer-dominated media market is a crucial originator of cultural vulgarity, this ‘mouthpiece of the Party and the State’ (dang he guojia de houshe) had always sanctimoniously drawn a clear boundary with commercialisation. The market would apparently smear the purity of central media. Shi Tongyu, a researcher from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, also placed exceptional trust in CCTV for its adherence to party-state values. He said:

As for the question why I aimed [my criticism] only at Super Girl Voice and did not mention Dream China, there are actually many similar talent shows on China’s screens … To be honest, I have a preference or even favour towards many CCTV programmes because it is a great national-level platform. From the fundamental point of safeguarding the national interest and image, the point of view I choose is often a gentle reminder and the words I use are not very strong if CCTV’s programmes have any problem. In the overall research direction, I indeed defend CCTV. I think that if this counts as selfishness, it is also explained from the perspective that I am a scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

至于说到为什么仅仅针对《超级女声》，而没有谈到《梦想中国》，实际上类似中国电视屏幕上选秀的节目还有很多……坦率的说，我对中央电视台的很多节目也一种偏爱，甚至有一种袒护，因为中央电视台是国家大台，从维护国家形象的国家利益这个根本点出发，如果中央电视台的节目存在问题的话，我选择的角度一般都是提醒，确实用的言词不是很激烈。我在总体的研究方向上，确实护着中央电视台。我认为如果这算私心的话，我觉
It seems taken for granted that the bureaucratic scholar should align himself with CCTV as the cultural representative of the party-state. It is nevertheless ironic that the commercialised degree of CCTV was not lesser than that of provincial television stations. CCTV has long been the most profitable media conglomerate in China. In 2005, its advertising revenue amounted to 8.6 billion Chinese yuan (CCTV, 2006). Even so, while CCTV was still hesitant about how to perfectly combine its commercial interest with propagating a pedagogic and dogmatic discourse in its television entertainment, the success of Super Girl Voice demonstrated that CCTV’s provincial counterparts could successfully comply with the commercial nature of television entertainment to create a nationwide wave of the talent show genre.

CCTV in the competition surrounding talent shows used its dominant position in the central media to censor rising stars on provincial networks. This was often called ‘CCTV blocking super girls’ (yangshi fengsha chaonü). On 11th November 2005, the Beijing Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG) invited five super girls – Li Yuchun, Zhou Bichang, Zhang Liangying, Ji Minjia and Huang Yali – to sing the final song for the unveiling of the mascots. When CCTV broadcast the performance live, the director cut all close shots and only kept long shots, making it difficult for television audiences to identify the stars’ faces (People, 2005a). A similar situation occurred again in another cultural activity organised by BOCOG in 2008 (People, 2008). As Lang Kun, director of CCTV Literature and Art Centre, said: ‘We have our own super girls. We would leave the opportunities for the winners of Dream China and Avenue of Stars. So “super girls” would absolutely not perform on the Spring Festival Gala’ (China, 2008). In fact, as the most popular stars of the period, CCTV did not invite those who found their fame in the talent shows aired on provincial television stations to perform on the station’s Spring Festival Gala or any of its other entertainment programmes until 2013; at this time, some of these individuals were regarded as successful, professional and serious performers after gradually casting off the
talent show star label (Sina, 2012b). Nevertheless, it is ironic that whatever vulgarity *Dream China* reflected is largely similar to that of its rival *Super Girl Voice*. An online user named Baima Xiao Xifeng defined the rivalry as a competition between ‘evil vulgarity’ and ‘low vulgarity’ (*e’su* and *disu*) (Southcn, 2005). In his or her view, CCTV employed an evil two-handed strategy: on the one hand, CCTV attempted to fabricate a charge of communicating vulgar culture to place *Super Girl Voice* and HNSTV under the pressure of public opinion; on the other hand, it also wanted to capitalise on the pattern and success of *Super Girl Voice*. Another online user named Xiaoli’s Smile (*xiaoli de xiao*) in a post demonstrated how ordinary viewers regarded the accusations of vulgarity to be unreliable:

The judgement criteria for television programmes are different from those of high art. It is not strange that *Super Girl Voice* does not appeal to refined temperaments if [someone] uses the criteria of high art to label it as ‘vulgar’. However, television is just a form of household media. High art may be enjoyed by other means. The quality of television programmes and whether they are vulgar or not should be decided by how audiences enjoy them. If adult movies were broadcast on the screen, it would be fiercely condemned by society no matter how interested audiences were. The masses would consciously resist the real ‘vulgar culture’. But why do so many people support *Super Girl Voice*? Is the content of the show really as vulgar as some critics say? The impact on audiences is not as harmful as some people claim.

I can clearly read a youth inspirational story of ‘Cinderella’ in *Super Girl Voice*. To realise their dreams of stardom, must [the girls] make so much effort – how much pressure do they have to withstand? Are their successes in the show achieved easily? Moreover, why can’t young people pursue their dreams? Must the dream of being a star be inferior to others? Those who want to be a scientist would still develop in their own direction while those who could be an artist, like
conservatoire students, are supposed to carry on their main business of entertainment. At least Super Girl Voice provides these young female dreamers with a competitive platform and a good space for development. The final result is decided by the votes of the masses. This is the progress of social democracy. However, I do not deny that the pursuit of commercial interests has led to scandals (heimu) for pursuing commercial interests. But, such is the status quo of China! After all, [we] should focus on the positive aspects.

While some internet users and liberals celebrated cultural pluralism that had manifested in the astonishing success of talent shows by means of grassroots culture, former officials, bureaucratic scholars, some media rivals and official artists formed an interest group by distinguishing ‘mainstream’ and ‘vulgar’ culture to produce a binary opposition. In the past, various cultural campaigns created ‘reactionary culture’ (fandong wenhua), ‘cultural dross’ (wenhua zaopo), ‘yellow culture’ (huangse wenhua) to label kinds of culture and their carriers of which the party-state was wary. Likewise, the double-evaluation standard for talent shows is biased and based solely on administrative levels of television stations, rather than on objective investigation and demonstration. The conservative elites who benefited from this party-state dominance attempted to protect their own vested political and economic interests at the time. Meanwhile, they applied the ‘vulgar culture’ label to collude with the party-state media policymakers, who were poised to launch a cultural crackdown on television entertainment.

Aside from the enquiry into the cultural taste of talent shows, the debate during the popularity of Super Girl Voice was also interwoven with discussions
on whether its overwhelming success could represent the rise of democratic awareness in the one-party authoritarian political system, as well as whether the genre was a positive incentive to promote democracy in China. Many scholars employed the Habermasian concept of civil society to associate democratic awareness with the form and content of talent shows (Z. Wang, 2005; Z. Zhu, 2005). Enthusiasm for democracy is manifested in the voting mechanism of talent shows but also in online discussions. In her study of public discourses concerning Super Girl Voice, Jingsi Wu (2012) pointed out the internet’s potential as a discursive public space outside the official media; the technology reflects the ‘civic engagement’ between the television entertainment practice and discourse and political expressions’ (pp. 402–403).

Some New Left intellectuals questioned whether popular voting and online public engagement between fans was a worthwhile democratic mechanism for potential political reform in the future. In their opinion, Super Girl Voice is not a good example of democracy within talent shows. Xiaoyu Wang’s criticism was that many scholars and journalists over-interpreted the representation of democracy in Super Girl Voice, in the process overlooking the drawback of the selection process of the genre (X. Wang, 2005). After all, HNSTV is a state-owned media outlet under the supervision of the provincial party committee and government. Therefore, both popular voting and mass participation were a kind of entertainment programming mode to accommodate global media culture and cope with market competition, rather than a political intention that promoted values of Western democracy.

Furthermore, the New Left intellectuals also interrogated the deficiency of democracy articulated in talent shows. Jilin Xu argued that populist democracy could be easily manipulated by the market and capital because of a lack of transparent procedures and equal structure (J. Xu, 2005). As Xu noted, ‘An invisible hand hides behind the contest.’ Voting via SMS created an illusion about the supremacy of public opinion in realising the secret power of will and commercial desires of sponsors (J. Xu, 2005). The nature of voting via paid SMS does not adhere to the ‘one person one vote’ principle, but rather is more in line
with ‘one yuan one vote’ (yiyuan yipiao). In fact, the debate about democracy shown in talent shows epitomised the long-standing divergence between New Leftists and liberals. The New Left did not deny the value of democracy itself, but instead debate and compete with liberals over what it is, or which kind of democracy would be appropriate for China. Xu thinks that the long-term polemic between the liberals and the New Leftists about democracy concentrates on the difference between indirect democracy and direct democracy (J. Xu, 2002, p. 40). The liberals’ advocacy for indirect democracy is inclined towards representative democracy as seen in Western societies, so they celebrate the procedural democratic value of popular voting and mass participation in talent shows. Regarding the liberals’ pursuit of political democracy as a kind of formalism, the New Left argues more for so-called ‘full democracy’ (quanmian minzhu). This latter type is aimed at ‘economic equality’ or ‘economic democracy’, rather than being preoccupied with the form of voting per se (J. Xu, 2002, p. 40). Xu was concerned with the populist democracy represented by the process of popular voting in talent shows (J. Xu, 2005). While many Western media outlets were aware of the liberals’ aspiration for democracy with the popularity of talent shows (Jakes, 2005; Reuters, 2005), the New Leftists feared that the talent show genre only paralleled the concept of democracy in its use of popular voting. When China remained short of a sound constitutional system and universal citizens’ democratic quality, the democracy defined by talent shows could neither bridge the gap between rich and poor nor maintain social stability and economic development.

The New Leftists’ disdain for the democracy shown in talent shows and the conservative elites’ accusation of vulgarity against the genre eventually integrated into public opinion against talent shows, paving the way for party-state intervention. To some extent, the debate surrounding the aesthetic and democratic evaluation of Super Girl Voice legalised the SARFT’s censorship and regulation of the genre because the laissez-faire media market became overwhelmed with unregulated content. To the liberals, the market mechanism is a preferred medium for resolving problems of media confusion, and the ‘rule of law’ (not rule by law) should serve as the governing framework for state regulation of media. However,
the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign was carried out in the name of ‘morality construction’ (daode jianshe). The idea was to rectify talent shows and other television entertainment genres and struggle against the liberals so the party-state could re-establish its cultural hegemony when this Western-invented genre potentially deconstructed the party-ordained cultural and moral order.

In comparison to the rule of law, cultural-moral governance is a resilient ‘moral lever’ for balancing the needs of the party-state and the market. With the differentiation of society, the market emancipates individuals from moral controls (Luhmann, 1982, pp. 198-199). The moral-neutral nature of the market is mapped with the exchange value between people and commodities, or between people as commodities (McGrath, 2008, p. 8). Hui Xiao (2006) defines the 2005 season of Super Girl Voice as a ‘crying game’ because many contestants used their tears to shape their own innocent images and gain the audiences’ sympathy (p. 63). Within the discursive system of the show, the moral engagement between contestants and audiences became a standard for distinguishing between good and evil. From the perspective of party-state cultural regulators, the sentimental presentation was conceived as an example of vulgar culture because these needless tears were aimed to be appealing to the public. This implies a moral conflict between talent shows and the party-state ideology. Chinese law has difficulty coping with many ideological challenges of the party-state and its cultural hegemony, most of which are caused by market diversity. Even so, resilient morality is not only a governing tool but also a governing pursuit that can be evidenced in the series of analyses of cultural policies as shown above, as well as in media discourses, as I will analyse in the following chapters.

In general, the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign is a cultural-moral governing process exemplifying the party-state’s two-sided attitude towards the neoliberal media market. From the perspective of media industry development, the party-state intends to make use of market mechanisms to cement its cultural hegemony by encouraging state-owned media conglomerates to become stronger and bigger. Meanwhile, party-state regulators keep their eyes on the discursive construction centred by the market or viewer ratings. The campaign is oriented
ideologically by the ‘Core Socialist Values’ (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhiguan*) with which the party-state enwraps its authoritative will. In fact, the 24-word ‘Core Socialist Values’ were first defined in Hu Jintao’s final report at the Eighteenth National Party Congress in 2012, where he officially handed over to new Party leader Xi Jinping (Gow, 2017, p. 99). Hu proposed that the party should ‘promote prosperity, democracy, civility and harmony; uphold freedom, equality, justice and rule of law, and advocate patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship, so as to cultivate and observe the Core Socialist Values.’ Although the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign was launched earlier than the official formation of the ‘Core Socialist Values’, this ongoing cultural-moral campaign aimed at television entertainment has been integrated into a more wide-spread campaign for disseminating the Core Socialist Values.

From regulating talent shows to curbing television entertainment, the SARFT has always harnessed and reinforced the propaganda and educational functions of the country’s mass media. In fact, state-controlled media institutions assume the sole responsibility for their own profits or losses. Yet, owing to the state’s ownership of television stations, the party-state legalised and even mystified the crackdown on television entertainment in the name of urging them to undertake social responsibility. It used the high moral ground to blur the distinction between the public sphere and mass media. The party-state forces the media to disguise their profit-seeking nature to construct a public discourse in the absence of autonomy that rightfully belongs to the public sphere.

Used to echoing the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign, Neil Postman’s aphorism, ‘Amusing ourselves to death’ (*yule zhisi*), has been widely quoted as a powerful theoretical argument against the excessive entertainment of television programmes (Kong, 2014, p. 2). His book *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business* was translated into Chinese in 2004, coinciding with the first wave of talent shows during the progression of media commercialisation and globalisation. In the foreword, Postman (2006) claims that Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, in which people are so oppressed by their addiction to amusement that they sacrifice their rights, reflects the twenty-first
century much better than George Orwell’s *1984*, where state control torments the public (pp. xix-xx). Postman’s contextualises his critique in American neoliberalism by observing how television culture and technology have resulted in excessive entertainment of public discourse in American society. The entertainment crisis of American public discourse conforms to the development of neoliberalism, perhaps formulating the new agents of oppression. As Postman (2006) points out, ‘people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think’ (p. xix). This point indeed reflects the prophetic and dystopian vision that Huxley presents in his *Brave New World*. The ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign bears a superficial resemblance to Postman’s attitude. One is left with the question of whether China’s party-state intervention over television entertainment is a successful practice to balance the relationship between public and entertainment discourses.

In his analysis of the ‘curb the entertainment rules’, Xiaoyu Wang (2011) highlights two differences between Postman’s vision and the party-state’s governing practice. First, it is in the context of a democratic system and the market economy that Postman criticises the negative impact of television culture on public discourse in American society. In contrast, China’s television culture is contextualised in ‘neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics’. It combines a system of authoritarian centralised control and the market economy officially in the name of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. The CPC’s official stance is to have China’s media maintain a balance between commercial interests and social responsibilities, but the official ideology is clothed in public discourse, social responsibility, public welfare and morality. These have become confused with the discursive modes of pure entertainment. Second, it is worth noting that Postman’s concerns about excessive entertainment trends in mass culture are not aimed at pure entertainment itself but at the means by which serious public discourse can express itself:

[T]o avoid the possibility that my analysis will be interpreted as standard-brand academic whimpering, a kind of elitist complaint against ‘junk’ on television, I must first explain that my focus is on epistemology, not on aesthetics or literary criticism. Indeed, I appreciate junk as much as the next fellow, and I know full well that
the printing press has generated enough of it to fill the Grand Canyon
to overflowing. Television is not old enough to have matched
printing’s output of junk. (Postman, 2006, p. 16)

Nevertheless, the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign caused public and
entertainment discourses to cross-contaminate. This is just one reflection of how
the media neatly carries out ‘neoliberalism as exception’ and ‘exceptions to
neoliberalism’ – the twin modalities of neoliberal governmentality – to respond to
the party-state’s cultural-moral governing initiative as well as their own profit-
seeking nature (Ong, 2006). Under the condition of media marketisation, the so-
called ‘morality construction’ was encouraged and forced by the ‘curb the
entertainment rules’. These were bound to refer to public issues represented by the
voice of the party-state ideology. Their discursive mode remains entertaining
enough to attract audiences. This is an application of ‘neoliberalism as exception’
to reduce the negative influence and results of state intervention in the market.
Moreover, from the angle of ‘exceptions to neoliberalism’, pure entertainment
programmes cannot resist the party-state ideological hegemony. Strongly
impacted by the campaign, their content universally attempts to cater to the needs
of the party-state ideology by integrating some serious public issues into the form
and content of the entertainment itself. This is a strategy that profit-driven media
institutions often use to avoid being accused of cultural vulgarity.

In a macroscopic view, the above twin processes reveal how the state and
market exert their influence on styles, forms and content of media discourses. The
‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign has indeed swept away some alleged vulgar
media discourses, but China’s television still presents a large amount of
entertainment discourse. The campaign is not meant so much to ‘curb the
entertainment’, but rather to control the entertainment and keep it within the
cultural-moral framework laid out by the party-state. In the past decade, the talent
show genre has become one of the most representative genres of pure
entertainment programming in China. Its transformation epitomises the re-
establishment of the party-state cultural hegemony. By analysing how the
campaign led to the transformation of the genre on a discursive plane, we can
further understand how China’s television entertainment programmes evolve under ‘neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics’.

2.5 Conclusion

The combined action of party-state regulation and market mechanisms has increasingly remade talent shows to echo the sociocultural context of contemporary China. As represented by Super Girl Voice and other similar talent shows in the mid-2000s, the emergence and popularity of the genre resulted from deepening media marketisation, especially with intense global cultural engagement and internet popularisation, violating the established cultural-political order that the party-state dominated. What the SARFT was concerned with was therefore a series of ideological struggles shown not only in talent shows themselves but also in social debates surrounding the genre’s popularity. While the SARFT was unhappy with the ‘Super Girl’ phenomenon, the imposition of the party-state’s ideology on talent shows was not a problem solved by impartial law but instead a form of cultural-moral governance by which the formulaic discourse of talent shows has changed. This discourse is subordinate not only to the elusive taste of the media consumption market but also to official censorship and regulation: what Wanning Sun (2007) calls ‘dancing with chains’. The media competition epitomised in television entertainment is reflected in the media market and process of endeavouring for the SARFT’s approvals. This leads to the exchange of interests between the party-state and mass media.

The cultural-moral governance, along with media commercialisation, indicates that talent shows and their discourse have gradually broken away from the criticisms of aesthetic vulgarity over the past decade – a factor I analyse in depth in the following two chapters. There are two striking aspects of the discursive changes of talent shows in China through the party-state’s cultural-moral governance. The first discursive strategy of talent shows is to shift the focus from neoliberal individualism to the integration and unification of individual and national values by combining Confucianism and nationalism to supplement party-
ordained socialist values. At the same time, this is far from a total denial of neoliberal market value. Instead, the idea is that the market can drive public, social and national developments with personal achievements rather than highlighting the contradiction between public and private. In Chapter 3, I will concentrate on discursive change by analysing the official ‘China Dream’ discourse and the nature of public interests in China, both of which talent shows articulate. The second strategy is that the original grassroots-centred discourse of talent shows has evolved into exquisite professionalism. In chapter 4, I will take on the case of I Am a Singer, in which veteran singers compete with each other in the well-perceived talent show form. I use this as an example to discuss how an aesthetic renaissance of exquisite professionalism is manifested in not only the enhancement of visual and auditory texture in the genre, but also in the discursive construction of the benevolent ‘music arena’. Aside from the model of simply copying and imitating Western counterparts, China’s well-prepared talent shows have become platforms for the ‘proper telling of China’s story’ (jianghao Zhongguo gushi).
Chapter 3 Narrating the ‘China Dream’ in ZJSTV’s two talent shows

The previous chapter dealt with the process of remaking talent shows in China. This Western-inspired genre has been heavily stamped with Chinese characteristics in that it caters to the dual needs of the Chinese ideological state apparatus and the coexisting highly competitive media market. The discursive changes to China’s talent shows embody not only the objective of the SARFT’s regulation and censorship, conceived as a process of ‘governing culture’, but also the reestablishment of the party-state cultural hegemony by ‘governing society through culture’. As discussed in the previous chapter, the ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign is a cultural-moral governance strategy operating by means of ideological negotiation and conflict between the party-state and different intellectual groups. This chapter, as well as the one that follows, concentrates on several observable prominent formulas that brand the discursive change away from the intellectual accusation of cultural vulgarity.

In this chapter, I discuss how the political discourse of the ‘China Dream’ doctrine permeates narratives of talent shows by examining two high-profile broadcasts on ZJSTV: The Voice of China and China Dream Show. Whether in Anglo-American or Chinese talent shows, the dream narratives saturate the genre (L. Yang, 2013, p. 518). While Chinese liberals have celebrated the cultural pluralism bursting from the Western-inspired genre, the party-state has exhibited wariness of the original cultural orientation of talent shows that use neoliberal logic. Indeed, the dream narratives have always represented excessive selfishness and egocentrism, which themselves tend to be instigated by market competition. For example, in Super Girl Voice, neoliberal self-fulfilment values in the various dream narratives were often closely tied to individualism: some judges habitually made harsh and even offensive comments toward amateur contestants; some contestants performed unconventionally to attract the public in the name of their dreams; some fans emotionally expressed their love toward grassroots idols. The
party-state has been unwilling to see the diffusion of various media representations coinciding with postsocialist chaos during the neoliberal economic reform period.

Some scholars have argued that ‘the ubiquitous dream narratives’ in China’s talent shows have changed as a direct result of party-state regulation and censorship. In her study of *China’s Got Talent*, Ling Yang argues that the show ‘incorporates a more disciplinary version of dream discourse by explicitly and implicitly instructing the audience on how to cope with social reality, what to dream and what not to dream, and how to seek personal identity and happiness’ (2013, p. 518). The dream narratives in China’s talent shows echo the grand narrative of the ‘China Dream’, which is an official slogan that President Xi Jinping has promoted and used since the start of his leadership in 2012. The notion outlines the future vision of ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.’ The party-state explicitly intends to inspire the masses with imagined unification between national and individual ideals, while simultaneously portraying the market as being in harmony with the party-state’s will and social developments. The more politically correct turn of the dream narratives articulated in talent shows in alignment with the state narrative is one of the most significant media representations of the ‘China Dream’.

This chapter begins by elaborating on the ideological connotations surrounding the notion of the ‘China Dream’. This frequently-used political discourse in today’s China is aimed to consolidate the party-state regime by incorporating Confucianism and nationalism into the framework of China’s socialist market economy under the aegis of supplementing supposedly foreign culture with ‘Chinese characteristics’. Along with emphasising consistency between national and individual dreams, the ‘China Dream’ is also a strategy to integrate neoliberal market values into the socialist agenda of public developments. In the second and third sections of this chapter, I carry out a discourse analysis of two talent shows aired on ZJSTV: *The Voice of China* and *China Dream Show*. ZJSTV is a top-tier provincial satellite channel in China, and given its leading national position in China’s television entertainment, its talent
shows are a good case for comprehending the representative formulas of dream narratives in China’s talent shows. I pay special attention to two discursive strategies that I call ‘good persons’ and ‘public interests’. Both revolve around party-ordained dream narratives through appealing entertainment discourse and reinventing more positive images of individuals and the market under the state-dominated neoliberal framework.

3.1 Dreaming the ‘China Dream’ in talent shows

To understand recent dream narrative trends, it is necessary to make a brief detour through the ideological implications of the ‘China Dream’. The term ‘China Dream’（Zhongguo meng）has become the most widespread political motto since the beginning of Xi Jinping’s leadership (2012–present). On 29th November 2012, Xi Jinping, as newly appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC), first used the term ‘China Dream’ in his speech while visiting ‘The Road Towards Renewal’ exhibition at the National Museum of China in Beijing. Xi defined ‘China Dream’ as ‘realising the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ (Xi, 2014a, pp. 35-37). He further crystallised ‘China Dream’ in the ‘two centennial goals’（liangge yibainian mubiao）(Xi, 2014a, pp. 35-37). The first centennial goal refers to the centenary of the CPC’s founding in 2021, at which point China will ‘build a well-off society in an all-around way’（quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui）. As a concept rooted in Confucianism and socialist ideology, xiaokang roughly means ‘moderate prosperity’, outlining a social vision for the overall living standards of all Chinese people by totally wiping out poverty. The second centennial goal is to transform China into ‘a prosperous, democratic, civilised, harmonious, and modern socialist country’ by 2049 – the founding centenary of the Peoples’ Republic of China. According to Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory (1985), the ‘China Dream’ is a ‘nodal point’ in the political discourse of today’s China. Similar to the ‘harmonious society’ Hu Jintao proposed during his tenure of leadership, the ‘China Dream’ has become a privileged signifier around which the party-state orders other signifiers. Other concepts, such as the state, the market and individuals, acquire their meanings from discursive relationships with the ‘China Dream’ as a political ideal. The
‘China Dream’ is an ideological product of maintaining a one-party authoritarian system while also developing a market economy. ‘Confucian nationalism’, a hybridised ideology formed by reconciling (Western) nationalism and (Chinese) Confucianism, redefines what it means to have harmony between the state and individuals, placing emphasis on the party-state’s legitimacy. At the same time, neoliberal practices now constitute many aspects of socio-cultural life – though, this only occurs in a state-sanctioned developmental way (Bell, 2014). Indeed, the power-related processes of discursive inclusions and exclusions surrounding the notion of the ‘China Dream’ need to be further addressed.

First, the nationalist discourse of the ‘China Dream’ is explicitly constructed through placing China and its constituent individuals in a series of floating imaginations between the past and future, and between China and the world. The great national rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is contextualised in complex historical emotions of national honour and trauma. Chinese people are often immersed in the sense that China was a superpower and hub of geopolitics throughout its long imperial period. Meanwhile, another discourse surrounds the national humiliation of China by Western and Japanese powers in modern times until the CPC established the PRC in 1949 (Q. Cao, 2007, p. 433). In the historical dimension of the ‘China Dream’, the discursive juxtaposition between senses of national pride and humiliation implies two points. The first is that the CPC’s regime brought China out of its erstwhile national humiliation, and another is that the party will be a decisive factor in realising the rise of China and the people’s desire for better lives. Correspondingly, the party-state unites Chinese people under the umbrella of the ‘China Dream’ ideal by capitalising on their fears of future instability and uncertainty – few desire to see a return to the fabled dark times of the pre-communist era.

Moreover, the party-state has revived Confucianism in China over the past two decades, specifically incarnated in the socialist moral order of Hu’s ‘harmonious society’ and Xi’s ‘China Dream’. In Mao’s era, the CPC fiercely criticised Confucianism; Mao himself advocated for the destruction of tradition in order to consolidate his authoritarian power, even launching a series of political
campaigns and class struggles (Gregor & Chang, 1979). However, the ‘China Dream’ notion has specifically employed Confucianism to stabilise the established party-state political system during the process of national marketisation. China’s rapid economic growth in the past four decades has resulted in an increasingly serious problem of social polarisation and class consolidation, and thus weakened the authority of the party-state. Under this circumstance, the party-state has actively integrated the Confucian ideology and allegation of creating the harmonious symbiotic relationship between the state and its individual constituents into a series of political discourses through establishing the appealing vision of the future. As such, the ‘China Dream’ contends that the realisation of individual dreams is closely bound to China’s social and economic development as a nation. This doctrine also claims that without the revival of the Chinese people as a whole, it is hard for individuals to realise their dreams. In China, the definition of ‘a good person’ pertains to those whom the party-state considers obedient citizens (shunmin) who pursue their own personal successes within the accepted and current political-economic framework.

The Confucianist renaissance is highly compatible with China’s brand of nationalism. While the liberals who canonise Western democratic and universal values pin their hopes on potential political reform and gradual relinquishment of governmental control in the context of marketisation, David Gosset (2006) clearly points out ideological collusion between the New Leftists against the Western neoliberal market, and the Confucianists. This collusion results in what he calls ‘Sinocentric cultural essentialism’, and, as Daniel Bell (2014) claims, ‘Confucian nationalism’. As Chinese people have gradually restored their cultural confidence through rapid and continuous national economic growth, any moral values or ideology labelled as ‘Chinese tradition’ or ‘Chinese characteristics’ would be politically correct. This grand collective pursuit with the discursive absence of class contradictions avoids the conception of disunity among different population demographics with increasingly serious social polarisation. Meanwhile, the party-state regime is happy with its central position that Confucian nationalism has rationalised. By promising a utopian future, the ‘China Dream’ legitimises and
reinforces the CPC’s authoritarian political system, as such an ideology pertains to both internal and external affairs.

In addition, although the ‘China Dream’ places an explicit emphasis on the central role of the state, it is not a total denial of the market economy within the established framework of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. In Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) terms, ‘the market’ is an ‘element’ that requires multiple ways of understanding. By being related to the ‘China Dream’ as the nodal point, the market ‘element’ is a ‘moment’ within the party-state’s authoritarian framework in the name of a ‘socialist market economy’. At the Forum on Literature and Art in October 2014, Xi Jinping encouraged China’s writers and artists to play an irreplaceable role in realising the ‘China Dream’, and ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’, as well as ‘the two centennial goals’. He thinks that ‘artists should not lose themselves in the tide of a market economy nor go astray while answering the question of whom to serve’, and their works ‘should not be the slaves of the market and should not bear the stench of money’ (Xi, 2014b). According to Xi’s articulation, the market should not play a dominating role in the process of realising the ‘China Dream’ and constructing its representations. Xi’s words do not exclude the market and its related concepts from the ‘China Dream’ political discourse. Instead, the discourse incorporates other possible meanings of the market, such as those defined in the discourse of Western democracy and capitalism.

Indeed, the new market economy with Chinese characteristics has created and accentuated divisions in society on the basis of class, region and ethnic group, while the official articulatory practice in the discursive structuring of the ‘China Dream’ still adopts aspects of neoliberalism. The nodal point of the ‘China Dream’ is therefore articulated by the party-state beyond the antagonistic relationship between the state and the market. This is the alleged ‘third way’ in which the party-state has successfully incorporated market values into the socialist framework, thereby instituting a kind of state-controlled marketisation (L. Li, 2013, pp. 912-913; Y. Zhu, 2008a, p. 126). The market is articulated through its relations in two dimensions of the ‘China Dream’: the individuals and
the whole, or the private and the public. Ideologically speaking, the party claims
the market should be subject to the will of the party-state, the nation and the
collective in the discursive imagination of the ‘China Dream’. At the same time,
the ‘China Dream’ must comply with the consistency of national and individual
goals to serve social responsibility and public interest as an effective development
tool.

Interestingly, the neoliberal doctrine of self-reliance is compatible with
socialist morality. In her analysis of Hu’s ‘harmonious society’, Ying Zhu (2008a)
found that the Confucianism the party-state promoted at the time shows ‘little
faith in political and economic self-reliance and self-regulation of individual and
communities’ (p. 134). In this sense, the state discursively denies self-reliance to
underline an inseparable connection between individual improvements and overall
national advancement. Other than as a description of the state-expected
relationship with its citizens, self-reliance is also a state-canonised personal life
virtue. As a socialist market economy, the Chinese party-state no longer
intervenes in the autonomy of individuals as it once did in its initial planned
economy, such as assigning jobs to graduates. The Confucian Book of Rites (Liji)
states that ‘self-cultivation, a well-managed family, and the ability to administer
the state and to bring peace to the nation’ (xiushen qijia zhiguo pingtianxia) are
paramount. Self-improvement is no longer taboo in the socialist market economy
as long as it is subordinate to the ‘overall situation’ (daju) — an official term the
party-state uses to describe the national interest that cannot be undermined or
resisted. While socialist self-reliance (zili gengsheng) is interpreted as faith in
independent development without foreign external support, neoliberal self-
reliance stresses the embodiment of individual entrepreneurialism within the logic
of market competition (L. Li, 2013, p. 912). The ‘China Dream’ has clearly
blurred the lines between these two kinds of self-reliance discourses by stripping
elements that go against the grain of the state-dominated market economy. Its
connotation is the ideal of individual self-reliance in harmony with national
interests.
The ‘China Dream’ and its ideological principles have been expanded from the political motto to television entertainment discourse. The ideological hybrid embedded in the ‘China Dream’ calls for the reconfiguration of the relationship between the state, the market and individuals. With the launch of the SARFT’s documents, as particularly represented by the ‘curb the entertainment rules’ in 2011, a new wave of talent shows like *The Voice of China* and *China Dream Show* appeared in the intersection between the Confucianism revival, the ideological hegemony of nationalism, and the unique Chinese practice of state-controlled neoliberalism. Resonating with this explicit political signal, the party-ordained dreams of ordinary Chinese people reflect neither the cruel aspects of a neoliberalism attached to the law of the jungle under which the weak serves as prey to the strong, nor the conventional Chinese grand narrative of collectivism and nationalism. Rather, China’s talent shows ultimately exhibit the dissolution of contradictions between national and individual interests. They also represent the establishment of the market’s positive role in China’s national and social development.

ZJSTV has played a significant role in promoting the new wave of talent shows in line with the ‘China Dream’. The outlet is a flagship provincial satellite channel affiliated with Zhejiang Radio and TV Group, a media conglomerate owned by the Zhejiang provincial government. Because the party-state threw state-owned television stations to the mercies of the market with the cancellation of official subsidies in the 1980s, ZJSTV is not only one of the party-state mouthpieces, but also a state-owned commercialised media. Indeed, the party-state has never loosened its ideological control over media discourse – even in the context of self-financing broadcasters – and it ensures no broadcaster deviates from the official doctrine. In terms of administrative structure, ZJSTV must accept administration and supervision from the Administrations of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television at both the national and provincial levels.

Despite such control at the hands of a watchful government, commercialisation of the television industry and commodification of television programmes have propelled ZJSTV to produce and broadcast more market-
oriented programmes to boost audience ratings and attract advertisers. After all, despite state control, it must still stay independently fiscally solvent. After more than twenty years of commercial operation and nationwide broadcast via satellites, ZJSTV has become one of the four top-tier provincial satellite channels, sporting counterparts in Hunan, Shanghai and Jiangsu (ifeng, 2016). Following HNSTV’s successful steps into television entertainment, ZJSTV has launched a series of entertainment programmes on the basis of the brand positioning of ‘China Blue’ (Zhongguo lan) and ‘the first dream channel’. While the party-state has forced revision, shrinking, suspension, and cancellation of many entertainment programmes since the launch of the ‘curb the entertainment rules’ in 2011, the SARFT’s regulators have repeatedly praised ZJSTV and its talent shows (R. Hu, 2013; M. Jiang, 2014, p. 20; G. Zhang, 2012, p. 130). Gao Changli, Deputy Director of the Division of Propaganda Management of the SARFT, contended that

We have already seen a new and positive trend with China Dream Show and The Voice of China. This is a virtuous cycle — importing, inheriting from, creating on the basis of, and developing foreign programming formats. When television programmes stand on the shoulders of giants to get surprises from the dream [narratives], the localised shows conform to Chinese aesthetic habits so as to resonate with the common people.

通过《中国梦想秀》和《中国好声音》这两个节目，我们看到一种新的、非常好的发展趋势，就是引进、继承、创新、发展国外节目形态，实现良性循环，节目站在巨人肩上，从梦想上看出惊喜，改造以后符合中国审美习惯，让百姓心灵产生沟通共鸣。《中国好声音》融入了很多中国百姓的生活、音乐故事，是很好的示范。我希望这两个节目能带领中国电视以更好的速度往前走。（Sina, 2012c）

Gao’s words indicate that talent shows are compatible with the Chinese political-cultural ecological landscape, assuming their narratives refrain from violating the party-state ideological stance articulated in the ‘China Dream’. Xia Chen’an, Director of ZJSTV, responded, ‘No PK, no votes, no champions, no star-formation plan, and no continuous broadcasts. We take the initiative to dance with “shackles”. This programme comes up to “positive energy” and down to earth. It is satisfied from top to bottom’ (Y. Chen, 2011). The so-called ‘satisfaction from
top to bottom’ (*shangxia dou manyi*) hinges on the political-economic success of dream narratives contained in such talent shows.

In this context, I analyse how these two talent shows apply a series of discursive formulas surrounding dream narratives, such as ‘good persons’ and ‘public interest’. Moreover, I consider how political and economic agendas work in conjunction to reconfigure dream narratives so as to fit them within the party-state ideological framework.

### 3.2 *The Voice of China*: Becoming ‘good persons’ with/without dreams

*The Voice of China* was a high-profile singing talent show broadcast on ZJSTV from 2012 to 2015 based on the Dutch programme *The Voice of Holland* (2010–present) that premiered on Radio Télévision Luxembourg 4 in September 2010. Alongside its rivals, including *Idols*, *X Factor* and *Got Talent*, *The Voice* franchise has become widely regarded as one of the most successful television talent show formats in history. To this day, over fifty countries have seen a version of this formula. ZJSTV and its commissioning partner Canxin Production set up a joint venture to produce and broadcast the Chinese version of the Voice series by purchasing the official franchise from Tien (previously known as Talpa), a commercial television channel in the Netherlands.\(^{28}\) While its English name *The Voice of China* adheres to the principle of the original show, the official Chinese name is *Zhongguo hao shengyin* (literally ‘China’s Good Voice’), commonly abbreviated to *hao shengyin*, (literally ‘Good Voice’). Whereas *Super Girl Voice* copied *American Idol* and caused a set of cultural controversies through its critique of vulgar culture, *The Voice of China* based on another foreign format triggered an alternative wave of talent shows in China.

\(^{28}\) There are two versions of *The Voice* in China: *The Voice of China*, broadcast on ZJSTV, and *The Voice of the Silk Road* (2014–present, *Sichou zhilu hao shengyin*) aired on Xinjiang Television Channel 9 in Uyghur with simplified Chinese subtitles.
The result is that the program was one of the most politically correct talent shows because of its capacity for presenting ideal individuals in the eyes of the party-state — what I call ‘good persons’ — a recent and commonly perceived discursive formula. With special emphasis on the ‘good’ voice in its Chinese name, the ‘good’ concepts in the formula are mainly articulated in the dream narratives from the format to the content in the following two aspects: the first ‘good’ means that the show narrates both contestants and mentors as a group of potential and/or distinguished artists pursuing ‘musical dreams’ (yinyue mengxiang). The second ‘good’ refers to media representations of their behaviours and moral sentiments in accordance with the social moral standard. The party-state propaganda discourse often calls these two points ‘a reputation for owning both professional excellence and moral integrity’ (deyi shuangxin) — a term commonly used to crown officially recognised maestros. Except for being an honourable description, it also acts as an officially favoured ideal for encouraging other artists.

Based on the original Western format, The Voice of China is a rivalry between sophisticated singers. Every season has fourteen or fifteen episodes spanning four main phases: blind auditions (mangxuan), battles and knockoffs, playoffs, and a finale. During the blind auditions stage, four mentors (daoshi) listen to the contestants while sitting in large, red chairs facing away from the stage to prevent them from seeing whom they are judging. If a mentor is fond of what they hear, they press a button to rotate the red chair to indicate their interest in working with that singer. If two or more mentors press buttons, the contestant may choose who to work with. The first stage ends when each mentor finishes organising their teams (zhandui), which are named after himself or herself, by selecting fourteen contestants. The mentors are responsible for instructing the performers as students (xueyuan), mentoring their performances, offering advice, sharing their experiences and helping them prepare for the battles and knockoffs phase. The mentors each work with an invited ‘dream mentor’ (mengxiang daoshi) to train the students. In the battle rounds, two singers from the same team battle each other by singing the same song simultaneously. After receiving suggestions from the different mentors, every mentor selects out seven contestants who win
the battles. While the best of the seven directly advance to the next phase, the
other six contestants continue into a knockoff round, in which there is a

The best of the seven directly advance to the next phase, the
corresponding battle round for each team. After the knockoff rounds, four singers
from each team survive into the third stage, known as the playoffs. During the live
broadcasts, each team competes within itself for the title of team winner. The

Eventually, each team has its most excellent contestant compete to become
the grand champion of the season during the finale night (*dianfeng zhiye*, literally
‘The Peak Night’). The finale is held in a stadium with a capacity of tens of
thousands of seats and a large live audience – a far cry from the studio
environment of previous episodes. Media representatives and live audiences vote
during the final results, with each category having equal weight.

In her study of *Britain’s Got Talent*, Gunn Enli suggests that the discursive
formula in contemporary talent shows that amateur contestants unexpectedly

In her study of *Britain’s Got Talent*, Gunn Enli suggests that the discursive
formula in contemporary talent shows that amateur contestants unexpectedly
show their talents is conspicuous and easily perceived (2009, p. 487). In this
respect, Susan Boyle is one of the most representative cases, which I mentioned in
the introductory chapter. The audition phase extensively uses this discursive
strategy in talent shows including *American Idol, Britain’s Got Talent, and Super
Girl Voice*. There are two points producing this sort of unexpected entertainment
effect. The first is that these well-known talent shows are accustomed to
manipulating grassroots images of participants through simple grooming styles
and/or language use; they differentiate contestants from the popular imagination
of how a star is supposed to look and sound. Second, shows deliberately edit
unexpected but talented performances in and out of a set of unprofessional funny
auditions. In addition, this ‘unexpected’ effect foreshadows the inspiring
neoliberal myth about the dream-come-true narrative of an ordinary person
becoming an extraordinary star. However, this kind of artistic inconsistency
between different contestants might be the origin of the so-called cultural
vulgarity in the Chinese discourse that critics levied at *Super Girl Voice* and its
analogues. With audiences’ aesthetic fatigue towards this widely used formula
and the cultural-political reorientation of the genre, more Chinese talent shows
have been leaning toward the pursuit of professionalism as spectacle. This trend is
shown in not only *The Voice of China*, but also in the emergence of professional talent shows, such as *I Am a Singer* (see Chapter 4), in which all contestants are professional and talented singers with pre-existing careers in the music industry.

As a transition between amateur and professional talent shows, *The Voice of China* forges a stage for singing talents committed to their musical dreams. Due to the programme’s orientation toward highly professional singing, almost all contestants on the show are ‘good’ singers. In fact, before the broadcast of the talent show every season, ZJSTV and Canxing Production launched a series of producers’ auditions to recruit talented and qualified singer contestants. The production team collaborated with local media and record companies to hold off-air auditions in cities across the country, as well as in other regions and countries, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, the United States, Canada, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands (Chinanews, 2013; HUANQIU, 2013; People, 2013c). No matter the nationality, anyone aged sixteen and above could apply for auditions. The large-scale producers’ auditions guaranteed the high artistic standard of the contestants who appeared in the blind auditions that the channel aired nationwide. Even some singers with musical achievements were interested in doing blind auditions to attain more fame, such as Yao Beina, Guan Zhe, Jin Runji and Lin Yu-chun. Even so, in the blind auditions, almost all contestants dress casually to label or identify themselves as grassroots. Most contestants can move on to the next round. For example, in the first season only 14 of 70 contestants were eliminated in the first round. The third season with the lowest elimination rate only broadcast three blind auditions of eliminated contestants. Although the show does not air all blind auditions, such a high passing rate in the broadcasts indicates that *The Voice of China* has no intention of designating elimination processes as a selling point. This is one means of differentiating itself from other talent shows.

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29 See the entry requirements of the fourth season of *The Voice of China*: https://web.archive.org/web/20150729101619/https://thevoiceofchina.eu/how-to-apply/
As a matter of fact, in the blind auditions phase, the entertaining suspense *The Voice of China* is expected to create was skillfully designed into the interactions between celebrity mentors and contestants. All mentors invited by the production team are influential recording artists in the Chinese-language pop music arena. They have included: Liu Huan (Season 1, abbreviated as S1), Na Ying (S1–S4), Yang Kun (S1, S3), Wang Feng (S2–S4), Harlem Yu (S1–S2, S4), Chang Hui-mei (S2), Chyi Chin (S3) and Jay Chou (S4). Among them, the first four artists come from mainland China while the latter four come from Taiwan. According to some reports, the production team paid about twenty million Chinese yuan (about three million US dollars) to every mentor for their appearances in the first season (Sheng, 2012). In a market economy, the high price means well-renowned pop singers are equipped to attract a substantial audience – substantial enough for the show to recoup (and even generate) revenues. When they sit on the symbolic red chairs and keep their backs to contestants, they are triggering a series of suspense appeals, such as: which mentors will press the buttons and rotate the chairs and at which moment? Which style of singing or voice will each mentor show special preferences for? If more than one mentor rotates, which team will the contestant like joining? When two or more mentors rotate their chairs for the same contestant, the contestant may choose their preference for who will mentor them for the duration of the show. This is a two-way selection process between mentors and contestants. To some degree, it is also a highlight monitored by home audiences and public opinions that how one contestant makes an artistic connection with a particular mentor. Even when it comes to the battles and knockoffs phase, there is still heart-pounding suspense related to waiting to see whom the mentor will indicate preference toward for advancing to the next round.

As it is, the consistently high level of singing artistry does not impede its entertainment effect, but canonises the ‘dream stage’ (*mengxiang wutai*), during which veteran singers share their ‘musical dreams’ with fledgeling competitors. ‘Musical dreams’ refers to not only artistic achievements but also to moral perfection. While the Voice’s format is oriented toward artistic excellence, the narrative of ‘musical dreams’ is typically structured around two interwoven layers:
artistry and morality. In this sense, the politically correct story’s narrative is that being a good person is the basis of being a good singer, and the ultimate essence of being a good singer is, likewise, being a good person. This point applies to the characterisation of contestants and mentors alike. The discursive formula of ‘good persons’ is deployed in this talent show in some cases more than others, such as in the case of Perhat Khaliq.

Perhat Khaliq (*Pa’er Hati*), a Uyghur male singer, appeared in the third episode of the third season. His blind audition mainly consisted of three elements: a self-introduction video clip, a singing performance, and dialogue between him and four mentors. His audition began with a one-minute self-introduction trailer with some old pictures of his family before it cut to footage of his backstage preparation. In the clip, he takes a microphone and stands at the centre of the stage. He plays the guitar and sings the classic pop song *How could you bear to let me feel sad? (Ni zenme shede wo nanguo?)*. During the more than three-minute performance, three of four mentors, Wang Feng, Na Ying and Yang Kun, press the buttons to rotate their big red chairs almost at the same time when he reaches the climax of the song: ‘The person who loves you most is me. How could you bear to let me feel sad?’ – a line he conveys with an emotional and husky voice. After his singing, the four mentors and Perhat share a conversation. At first, he briefly introduces his name to the mentors and his live audience. Yang Kun asks, ‘Are you an ethnic minority (*shaoshu minzu*)?’ He answers, ‘Yes, I am Uyghur.’ Yang Kun and Wang Feng speak admiringly of his singing as ‘the most special voice [in the show]’. Yang Kun asks him why he chose the song, and Perhat explains that his older brother recommended it when he was still alive. This response echoes his personal life experience that his older brother and parents died one after the other over the past twelve years. After he expresses his resolution to persist through his singing career, the mentors encourage him to sing again – this time a self-composed song. While Perhat stresses that this is a Uyghur language song, Na Yang responds, ‘We just want to listen to a Uyghur song!’

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30 The song was originally sung by Huang Pin-yuan, a Taiwanese singer, and has since spawned a wide variety of cover versions.
When he sings the second song *My Parents (Fumu)*, the mentors are once again deeply touched, but this time by his now sad and soulful voice. Wang Feng approvingly comments, ‘Music can really go beyond anything else, like language and ethnic groups!’ The mentor Chyi Chin then asks a question that regularly appears in *The Voice of China* and other talent shows: ‘You must have a dream, right?’ Perhat answers, surprisingly, ‘In fact, I don’t have any particular dream.’ Na Ying, seemingly shocked, responds, ‘Why would you say that?’ He goes on to explain, ‘I just do things, do my own things, and do my own things very seriously. My dreams will naturally come true.’ He explains that he had already realised a past dream of performing abroad, and then he adds, ‘I always play [my guitar]. I always sing. The dream finds me. It is not that I look for the dream.’ Wang Feng responds by saying, ‘Actually, your voice already includes the dream.’ Then, Yang Kun, Wang Feng and Na Yang express their appreciation for his singing talent, inviting him to join their respective teams. He eventually decides to join Wang Feng’s team. Before leaving the studio, Perhat emotionally hugs all four mentors. This episode ends with a warm and inspiring scene.

Perhat’s blind audition is one of the most representative examples of *The Voice of China*. The 15-minute audition – including a 30-second advertisement – is much longer than most other contestants. The blind audition heavily promotes him to the television audience and fully manifests the political correctness of the party-state ideology. Perhat features not only an excellent singer pursuing his musical dreams but also a humble and down-to-earth person with deep emotional bonds with his family, even after their deaths. There is no doubt about his powerful and emotionally charged singing talent. In fact, before taking part in the talent show, Perhat founded his pop-rock band Qetiq in 2006. He became a frequent artist at some European independent music festivals, blending Uyghur folk music with Western folk, jazz and rock (Xiong, 2014).

As a commercialised talent show, *The Voice of China* could easily have taken on a neoliberal theatre style inundated with burning ambition for ‘music dreams’. After all, this is a good opportunity to gain both fame and wealth. However, contestants in the show rarely seem ambitious regarding their own
singing careers. Perhat’s character is set to have a genuine and idealised attitude towards life and music, rather than caring about winning or losing, much less pursuing materialistic goals. To him, music is a lifestyle that involves expressing personal emotions. The high consistency of his artistic and moral qualities represented in the show also resonates in his singing content itself. As the song *To My Parents* goes:31

I want to go back to childhood  
I want to sleep in your arms  
I want to sit on the top tube of your bike  
Following you to the park  
Dad, Mom  

You often tell me to be a good person  
Stay away from earthly hypocrisy and pomposity  
To be a real self  
Dad, Mom  
Dad, Mom  

Your son now can also be regarded as a nice person  
I think that your wish has already been realised  
Just as what you said, I marry a beautiful wife  
Have two cute kids  
Just in this wonderful time  
Where are you both?  
Where are you both?

我想回到天真的童年  
想睡在你温暖的怀抱里  
我想坐在你自行车的前杠上  
跟着你去公园  
爸爸 妈妈  

你经常对我说要做个好人  
远离那些尘世的虚伪和浮夸  
要做真实的自己  
爸爸 妈妈  
爸爸 妈妈  

你的儿子现在也算是不错的人吧  
我想你的愿望已经实现了  
就像你说的我娶了个漂亮的老婆

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31 I translated it into the English-language lyrics according to the Chinese subtitles at the bottom of the screen.
有了两个可爱的孩子
就在这美好的时光
你们在哪里啊？
你们在哪里啊？

The song narrates the principle of being a good person, which his parents instilled in him. The narrative purifies and sanctifies his ‘musical dreams’, keeping them far away from the worship of consumerism and hedonism, wealth and extravagance, appearances and narcissism. These are all referred to as ‘vulgar values’ that the party-state mainstream ideology resists. With such a moral high ground, his words, ‘I don’t have any particular dream’ and ‘The dream finds me’, complete the whole image construction that relates being a good singer to being a good person without neoliberal ambition. This means that the media representation of his ‘musical dreams’ is not empty, but instead moralised or idealised. The dream narrative that highlights both integrity and artistic talent is implemented from the blind audition to the end of the show. When he finished as a runner-up in the grand finale, the sponsor JDB group awarded him the ‘Dream Star’ prize (mengxiang zhixing) (Sina, 2014a). It is paradoxical that his de-neoliberalised dream is recognised in the logic of neoliberal competition, with the process of the show (and the market itself) awarding him significant wealth and fame relevant in the neoliberal order.

Furthermore, Perhat’s television image contributed to a more positive perception of China’s Uyghur ethnic group. Before the broadcast of his audition in August 2015, there were pervasive nervous ethnic and religious tensions between the Uyghur (marginalised) and Han (majority) people because of a series of violent events, such as the Ürümqi riots in July 2009 and the Kunming terrorist attack in March 2014. Perhat’s blind audition explicitly constructs a landscape featuring a harmonious ethnic relationship between conflicting groups. The representation of mutual appreciation between the two sides is embodied in the unconventional aspects of his audition. While he sings the Chinese-language song with a special meaning to him, the mentors express their great enthusiasm for his own Uyghur culture and encourage him to sing another song; the second time he sings, he chooses a self-composed Uyghur-language song. Perhat’s positive image incorporates artistic and moral excellence and the Uyghur people into a discursive
construction of ‘the family of the Chinese nation’ (Zhonghua minzu da jiating).
As Wang Feng comments in the blind audition,

When I listened to you singing just now, I was thinking. If you are able to come to my team, I really hope that your Uyghur brothers and sisters can be proud of your voice, and also that all other ethnic groups, all people can realise that there is actually such a moving voice in our own country. It is too rare! I love it so much.

我刚刚在听你唱的时候，我一直在想。如果你来的话，我真的特别希望，能把这样的声音，让你的维吾尔族的兄弟姐妹们因为你而感到自豪，也让其他的所有各民族的，所有的人都因为你的歌声能够意识到我们自己，在我们这个国家当中，居然有这么动人的歌声。真是太难的了！我非常喜欢！

When the grand narrative, based on Chinese nationalism, stretches out to include individual pursuits, Perhat’s musical dream is endowed with a strong sense of mission similar to that embedded in the ‘China Dream’. This consciously conveys a vivid lesson that anyone in accordance with the nation, or more accurately the party-state, can achieve success along the lines of the ‘China Dream’ myth, regardless of ethnic identity. To the talent show boasting to be ‘China’s Good Voice’ according to its Chinese name, Perhat’s story complements the mirage of ethnic solidarity that this mythos purveys as a significant factor of social stability. The ‘China Dream’ is a facet of party-state ideology that also demands this.

In addition, the reactions of the mentors to Perhat’s audition epitomise the Confucian concept of the harmonious relationship between mentors and students. The kind of relationship consciously established by The Voice of China is different from those between judges and contestants in other high-profile talent show formats, including the Idols, Got Talent and X Factor. Indeed, Simon Cowell’s own features in Britain’s Got Talent and American Idol demonstrate a typically impolite and aggressive judge fond of being verbally aggressive to appeal to the preferences of the audience (Lorenzo-Dus, 2009; Lorenzo-Dus & Blitvich, 2013, pp. 34-35). This ‘confrontainment’ is likewise present in earlier Chinese copies like Super Girl Voice, Dream China and My Show. In the Chinese context, this sort of harsh judgement has its own term: ‘poisonous tongues’ (dushe), which has itself been sufficient evidence to accuse talent shows of
cultural vulgarity. It is also in this vein that one sees the concept of political correctness and its role in shaping Chinese talent shows.

In contrast, The Voice of China constructs the Confucian harmonious teacher–student relationship wherein mentors and students replace the earlier talent show roles of judges and contestants. At the beginning of the first episode of the third season, four mentors commit themselves to being good teachers on the show. Na Ying says: ‘This is my third time to serve as the mentor of “Good Voice”, but I am still passionate because I am eager to help those musicians with dreams.’ Wang Feng declares: ‘We are mentors rather than judges. Helping students is our responsibility.’ Yang Kun: ‘I hope that my students and I can share happiness produced by music.’ Chyi Chin: ‘There were so many excellent students on the stage of “Good Voice”. I am eager to become their bole (literally, “a good teacher”) very much.’ Here, the discourse is articulated around the moral order of the Confucian teacher-student relationship, represented in a series of terms, such as ‘help’, ‘responsibility’, ‘share’, and ‘bole’. The Confucian moral order is maintained through the Five Constant Virtues: (wuchang) – benevolence (ren), righteousness (yi), propriety (li), wisdom (zhi) and fidelity (xin). There is an emphasis on teacher’s dignity, where in terms of both knowledge and morality ‘The teacher is a person's mold and pattern’ (shi zhe, ren zhi mofan ye). Correspondingly, the student is supposed to treat teachers with profound respect. The strong emotional connection between mentors and students is articulated in the show, wherein mentors assume a posture of ardent desire for capable singers.

After Perhat chooses Wang Feng as his mentor during the blind audition, a set of close-ups shows that Yang Kun and Na Ying weep uncontrollably as a result. The plot is in dramatic contrast to the stereotypical scenes of previous talent shows that featured amateur contestants often crying themselves offstage after being eliminated. With regards to the following phases, the short video clips cutting before the live performance of each contestant conventionally tell a story

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32 This well-known saying is quoted from Yangze Fayan: Learning and Practice by the Western Han Scholar Yang Xiong (53 B.C.E.—18 C.E.).
about how mentors seriously help their students improve their singing skills and prepare for the competition. By providing a narrative of a harmonious teacher-student relationship, the show silently dismisses the realistic interpersonal pressure that many people in China face. The harmonious teacher-student relationship also conceals the common economic benefits for the two sides. In particular, certain mentors play an important role in the early careers of students in showbiz, so the public perception of some students is closely associated with public perception of mentors. For example, after the end of the first season, the runner-up Wu Mochou released her first single *I Will Give You* (*Wo yao geini*), in collaboration with her mentor Harlem Yu. Their teacher-student relationship became a selling point. This bundling reflects the mutually beneficial nature of such close ties. Therefore, it is a false impression that mentors offer gratuitous dedication to their students.

### 3.3 Unveiling the nature of public interests in *China Dream Show*

Talent shows like *The Voice of China* have evolved to represent political correctness, providing a narrative for how ‘a good person’ looks and how his or her dream acts in accordance with the official ‘China Dream’ campaign and the norms set and enforced by the party-state. Another way in which some talent shows cultivate socialist cultural taste with Chinese characteristics is by flaunting the pursuit of ‘public interest’ through dream narratives. As a representative example for the turn of talent shows, *China Dream Show* (*Zhongguo mengxiang xiu*) is a self-declared ‘public interest talent show’ (*gongyi xuanxiu jiemu*) meant to help participants realise their dreams. This is similar to what Laurie Ouellette and James Hay call ‘Charity TV’ (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, pp. 32-62) in their study of American reality TV. Charity TV programmes, such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* and *Miracle Workers*, adhere to neoliberal and

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33 The first eight seasons of *China Dream Show* (2011-2014) were a weekly programme broadcast for two seasons each year, starting in April and October. Every season of the programme lasted for about twelve weeks. In general, the show was aired during prime time on Saturday evenings. Every episode lasted for ninety minutes. From February 2015 to May 2016, the ninth season became a daily programme aired during prime time from Sunday to Thursday evenings, with each episode lasting for twenty-five minutes. Beginning on 25th February 2018, the tenth season has reverted to a weekly programme on Sunday evenings.
commercial logic while still intervening in issues of public welfare by helping needy individuals and families; the beginning of these types of shows was contextualised by further privatisation of public services during George W. Bush’s presidency (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, pp. 37-39). By contrast, *China Dream Show* sets a significant precedent for the wave of ‘public interest’ entertainment television programmes that take on a tone of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics. Shows outwardly proclaiming the pursuit of public interests mirror official concern with the social responsibilities of state-run broadcasters, whose mandates (dictated by the will of the party-state) are to shun vulgar culture. While the discursive formulas articulate that the realisations of various personal dreams are endowed with public interest, the SARFT’s regulators are happiest with the dream narratives that exist within the official framework of the ‘China Dream’. Meanwhile, at least from the angle of the producers themselves, it is important that the pursuit of ‘political correctness’ does not come at the expense of entertainment value.

ZJSTV purchased BBC’s *Tonight’s the Night* (2009–2011) franchise to produce the initial two seasons. In the two seasons, the original format mainly focused on the artistic dreams of ordinary people by featuring them living out their fantasies for real, as shown in the theme song ‘Let Dreams Fly’ sung by two presenters, Zhu Dan and Hua Shao, at the beginning of every episode. Its first season was a segment of ZJSTV’s previous variety show *Under the Happy Blue Sky* (*Kuaile lan tianxia*). Since its second season, *China Dream Show* has become an entertainment show apart from the rest. Each episode features five or six dream-seekers (*zhuimeng ren*), their dream-agents (*mengxiang dailiren*), and one to three dream-ambassadors (*mengxiang dashi*). In the show, two presenters first interview dream-seekers or their dream-agents, who are usually relatives and friends. During the interviews, the programme would broadcast some short clips of inspiring stories. Dream-seekers are often featured as very ordinary people who have the perseverance to pursue their artistic dreams and achieve a certain artistic standard, though facing some challenges in their real lives. Typical examples include a dwarf girl who dances, a single mother with a beautiful voice who helps her deaf son learn to speak, and a wife who composes many inspiring songs for
her disabled husband and sick son. After dream-seekers show and demonstrate their artistic talents, dream-ambassadors featured (often entertainment celebrities) might appear in the following phase. They typically provide face-to-face encouragement, appearing live as a surprise, and then perform with the amateurs on the show.

Since its third season in 2012, China Dream Show has transformed into a ‘public interest talent show’, having abandoned the BBC’s original format. The brand-new programming format created by ZJSTV’s own team extends the range of dreams beyond artistic aspirations, such as an unknown actor dreaming of acting as a soldier, a post-80s youth dreaming of building a medical room for the old age home he operates, a group of workmates dreaming of acquiring sound equipment for their community center, and so on. From the third to the ninth seasons, Zhou Libo, a famous comedian, featured as the fixed dream-ambassador in the new format. Because the presenter is the only person responsible for introducing sponsors and linking segments of dream-seekers, Zhou played a key role in driving the plot of the show using engaging narratives because he is in charge of interviewing dream-seekers and other guests. The narrative modes of the dream-seeker segments vary slightly with regard to details, but the general process is clear. A dream-seeker first makes a presentation about his or her dream in various forms, such as performing, speaking, playing a short clip on scene, and so on. Zhou then interviews the dream-seeker by asking some questions about the reasons, details and facts of the dream; he then negotiates with a group of dream-helpers (mengxiang zhulituan) made up of sponsor representatives, entertainment celebrities and media journalists to design a potential assistance package. While media journalists like to provide dream-seekers with social resources through their social networks, sponsors and

34 The third and fourth seasons contain twelve episodes divided into three stages: Dream Presentation (episodes 1–9), the Dream-fulfilment Moment (episodes 10–11) and the Dream Ceremony (episode 12). In the first stage, dream-seekers who receive at least two hundred votes from the dream jury can enter into the next stage. In the second stage, dream-seekers who obtain two hundred and forty votes or more gain support for achieving their dreams. Starting from the fifth season, the two phases of Dream Presentation and Dream-fulfilment Moment were combined into one stage. This means that all dream-seekers present their dreams only once, and as long as they receive more than two hundred and forty votes on the scene, dream-seekers gain the support promised by the show’s dream-helpers.
entertainment celebrities often promise direct financial support. At last, three hundred live audience members, or the dream-jury (mengxiang guanchatuan), take votes on whether to support the dream-fulfilment package. The final episode of every season involves a ‘dream ceremony’ (mengxiang shengdian), in which the show awards several prizes to selected participants in the season, and a grand prize for the most popular dream-seeker.

The substantive transformation of the programming orientation toward public interest extends the scope of dreams realised in the support of China Dream Show. This does not mean that any dream can be on the show. To recruit appropriate dream-seekers, ZJSTV established a specific division called the ‘Dream-fulfilment Office’ (yuanmeng ban) and arranged for in-person, online and telephone application methods (M. Jiang, 2014, p. 19). For example, the third season launched a large-scale recruitment drive it dubbed ‘The Big Action of Searching for Dreams in Hundreds of Cities’ (baicheng xunmeng daxingdong) in March 2012. The three-month-long activity hunted for dream-seekers appropriate for the new format. For this reason, ZJSTV organised two thousand activities in more than three hundred shopping malls and nearly one hundred campuses throughout the country. Besides sending crews to collect potential dream-seekers and their stories, China Dream Show accepts application materials via email.35

The application materials should include an application form with the basic personal information of the dream-seeker and his or her dream-agent, a life photo, and two videos including a talented performance and self-introduction of the dream-seeker. The application form has two key questions: (1) ‘In your opinion, how can we help the dream-seeker to fulfill the dream?’ and (2) ‘Please narrate the life experience and story of the dream-seeker.’36

The information on the application stressed that the ‘dream’ and ‘the life experience and story of the dream-seeker’ are the most important elements in considering an applicant’s suitability for the China Dream Show. The application also declares that the show

does not undertake the following functions: ‘supervision of public opinion, judicial justice, seeking medical advice, poverty alleviation, academic discussion, raising investment, business promotion.’ Excluding some kinds of dreams manifests the limit of ‘public interest’ for the show.

The means of narrating dreams supported by public interest in an officially accredited and appealing way has been a thorny problem for ZJSTV’s producers. The most important consideration is that the dream narratives cannot challenge the legitimacy of the party-state system, but rather they must highlight the concept of ‘social positive power’ (shehui zheng nengliang). China Dream Show has a prominent discursive formula that shapes the stories of dream-seekers in the name of the public interest with a combination of neoliberal rationality and sentimentality. The dream narratives might dig into their virtue of self-reliance by shifting attitudes toward predicaments into a series of self-enterprising and inspiring stories. Meanwhile, the show’s concern with ratings transforms into a demand for emotional stories that attract viewers. Thus, vulnerable groups, such as disabled persons, migrant workers and low-income earners, have become the most common dream-seekers in the show, while their stories might be articulated around the gap between their harsh realities and the inspiring dreams they choose to convey. The show ‘neoliberalises’ the theatre of promoting public interest by providing financial support or social resources to successful dream-seekers. The particular case of Yang Pei accurately captures this blend of neoliberal rationality and sentimentality.

Yang Pei, a 24-year-old girl in northwest China’s Shaanxi Province, stood on the stage of the fifth season of China Dream Show in May 2013. As she is introduced, it becomes apparent that she is a young double-arm amputee. After her self-introduction, the presenter Zhu Yali expresses a warm welcome and asks: ‘What is your dream?’ Yang firmly answered: ‘My dream is to open up a small cross-stitch embroidery shop.’ The presenter repeats her dream with a puzzled expression and confirms: ‘Cross-stitch embroidery? Are you going to sell other people’s works or your own works?’ The girl confidently answered: ‘Other people will buy my own works.’ At that moment, the television pictures cut to Zhou Libo
and the live audience, who warmly applaud her for this unexpected dream. The presenter carefully asks her what happened to her arms. Yang answers: ‘At the age of nine, when I was on my way to see my mum, I accidentally pulled an electrical wire. I didn’t know that it was loose. At that moment, the electricity went through my body. I felt that my heart was burning. I lost consciousness. When I woke up, all I knew was that I was lying on the ground. My mum was hugging me … and kept crying.’ After Zhu praises the contestant’s beautiful smile – perhaps to ease the tragic atmosphere that has washed over the scene – the programme cuts to a short video clip titled ‘Yang Pei: A Person’s Life in Shanghai’. The video shows her determination and ability to take care of herself on a daily basis, including washing her clothes, buying vegetables, cooking and so on, and how she has set up an embroidery stall to earn a living in the metropolis. The show proceeds to the phase ‘Dreams May Come’ (mengxiang zhaojin xianshi). The dream-ambassador, Zhou Libo, has a more in-depth conversation with Yang about the feasibility of her dream and some personal stories about the dream. Zhou first asks: ‘Why do you want to set up a cross-stitch embroidery shop?’ Yang replies: ‘Because embroidery … hmm … I can just spend a few yuan on material and do it myself. And I can sew it and sell it. I brought some of my works.’ After Zhou displays her works one by one to the live audience, Yang uses her right foot to pick up an incomplete work. Zhou invited her to show her skill onscreen. In the following three minutes, accompanied by the melody of the popular song The Girl Swinging Her Wings (Huizhe chibang de nühai), a set of close-ups shows every detail of Yang’s process, from threading a needle to using her feet to masterfully embroider. During the process, Zhou says, ‘That is why a human being is called the lord of creation. No difficulties can really stop [human beings].’

After Yang proves the feasibility of her dreams, Zhou starts a sentimental interview with the girl. He asks her: ‘Who do you want to thank most in your life?’ Yang answers, ‘My mum’ and further explains how her mother feels anxious about her future and distressed about the difficulties of selling her works on the streets of Shanghai. As the little girl chokes back her tears to tell her stories, her parents and brother appear behind her onstage. Because she is facing Zhou and
the live audience, she is the only person who cannot see them. With the cross-cutting shots to show the detailed facial expressions of her family and herself, Yang recalls how her mother persuaded her to give up the desperate idea of suicide, helping her to regain her spirit. She notes also that she would like to live on her own and at the same time to reciprocate the love of her parents. While Yang remains under the assumption that her family is back in her hometown, Shaanxi, Zhou repeatedly stresses the existence of real-life fairy tales; he then asks her to turn around. Four slow motion images taken from different angles record the emotional moment of Yang turning around and being surprised at her family’s arrival. After they cry and hug, she expresses her gratitude to her parents for her upbringing in emotional terms: ‘I want to tell my mum and dad, I am just like a normal girl. I am just like other girls. I can bring happiness to you. I love you. Thank you for the great support that you have given me.’

Subsequently, Zhou invites two celebrities in the group of dream-helpers, a famous comedian Pan Changjiang and an actress Shu Chang, to give Yang some encouragement. Then, Zhou announces that he is willing to pay ten thousand yuan for all six of her works shown on the scene earlier. He politely asks whether ten thousand yuan is enough. The girl shakes her head and says: ‘To me it is already a sky-high price!’ Before the vote, Zhou as the dream ambassador negotiates with the dream-helpers to put forward their assistance plan for Yang Pei. The online shopping website called ‘Best1’ proposes to financially support her dream. The cultural company ‘Golden Coast’ promises to offer technological support for her online shop, while two other sponsors also pledge support. In the end, Yang Pei receives 288 votes from the dream-jury. This result allows her to receive the listed support and fulfil her dream to open a small cross-stitch embroidery shop, a chance owed entirely to the dream-helpers of the China Dream Show. At that moment, a pair of huge wings right above her swing up with the upbeat melody of Flying Higher (Feide genggao). The live audience, cheering, rise in a standing ovation when Yang Pei and her family hug each other to celebrate her dream come true.
This is a representative example of the dream narrative created around the neoliberal doctrine. It contains two aspects: neoliberal rationality and sentimentality. The first half of Yang’s section pertains to the feasibility of her dream — that it seems not to be a promising dream for a double-arm amputee to open a shop and sell her own cross-stitched embroideries. Even for an ill-trained able-bodied person, embroidery is difficult. Initially, this fact makes her dream seem unreasonable and even unbelievable. She proves its feasibility by demonstrating her ability for self-care and independent daily living, as shown in the short video, but she also demonstrates a live presentation of her embroidery skills. In the television shots, Yang’s shining smile reflects her optimism and self-enterprising personality. Such evidence articulated around neoliberal rationality makes her dream reachable. In other words, if she did not have sufficient skills and an ability to stitch the embroidery, there would be no point in her receiving any help toward realising her dreams. The dream narrative appeals to neoliberal rationality by gazing upon the self-responsibility of the dream-seeker, as well as satisfying the audience’s curiosity. Some vehicles of this include when Yang’s remarkable embroidery skills inspire Zhou to praise the value and agency of human beings as ‘the lords of creation’, when the melody of *The Girl Swinging Her Wings* resounds, or when close-up shots show the details of how she uses her feet to sew on par with a person using their hands.

As the rational narrative builds the realistic level of the dream, neoliberal sentimentality gives the dream a series of deeper meanings with a strong sense of mission. Neoliberal sentimentality is articulated in Yang’s vulnerability discourse. After Yang performs her embroidery skills, Zhou interviews her to explore some stories behind her dream. For a young girl who is disabled, domestic affection is a topic that can easily pull an audience’s heartstrings. Zhou insists that the sentimental interview revolves around Yang’s mother. Under the guidance of Zhou’s questions, Yang emotionally tells stories about her and her family’s predicament, particularly stressing the importance of her own economic independence for her family. While the unexpected live presence of her family causes a climax of the emotional atmosphere, it quickly becomes apparent that Yang’s dream has already expanded from herself to her family. There is no doubt
that her self-employment can lighten the financial burden of her needy family, who hail from a poor and rural area of western China. As a result, the sensational expression redefines the importance of her dreams by connecting the show and its results to the future of Yang’s family.

This example shows that the essence of public interests is not necessarily the collective pursuit of the welfare of the general populace, but a self-actualisation through philanthropic support of different social forces. First, the dream’s particular narrative in the show highlights the harmonious relationship between the state, the market and needy individuals at the expense of the universality of public interests. In fact, neoliberal ‘accumulation by dispossession’ at the cost of the depriving public interests has resulted in social polarisation and conflict during the transitional period of China (Harvey, 2005, p. 159). The life dilemma that many needy and vulnerable groups face is a close and universal connection with the status quo of unbalanced social and economic development. Universality could have been a breakthrough for promoting public interest in reality; however, China Dream Show angles its narrative away from the systematic reflection and criticism of social contradictions in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, region and so on. For example, Yang’s story implies a serious social issue regarding the employment of disabled people: according to the official party-state narrative, the government should have taken over the responsibility. China Dream Show does not mention any governmental responsibility, but merely concentrates on the individual layer. As serious public issues are packaged into the entertainment discourse, it seems that Yang’s dream fulfilment can represent the universality of public interests. The disguised replacement of public interests can only solve a limited number of individual difficulties, but not the underlying social problems. Meanwhile, Chinese audiences often confuse the social responsibility of the media with that of the government, largely because the party-state has controlled the media industry so thoroughly for most of living memory. In a nutshell, the public has become accustomed regarding what the media do as tantamount to government action. This is precisely the result of what Yuezhi Zhao calls ‘the socialist legacies and the premises of the Chinese state’ (2008, p. 6). In the show, the dream narratives
should have contained broader public issues, including religion, ethnic minority rights, LGBT rights and so on. Such entertainment always avoids dealing with these sensitive topics, portraying them as irrelevant to the dream-fulfilment of ordinary people, and limited to the official framework of the ‘China Dream’.

Furthermore, the show often places great emphasis on the relatively positive role of the market rather than the government regarding achieving dreams. In the case of Super Girl Voice, Hui Xiao (2006) argues that an emotional performance can contribute to the socioeconomic discourse of building a marketable individual ‘self’ to develop the post-Mao neoliberal market economy (p. 63). This means that many contestants in Super Girl Voice are adept at reaching sentimental expressions to attract popular votes via text-messaging. In comparison, China Dream Show is a closed neoliberal theatre where dream-seekers ask for help from sponsors, usually in the form of money. This builds a close tie between capital and dream-fulfilment conveyed by dream-helpers played by sponsors. It is a superficial phenomenon that dream-helpers and the dream-jury have full autonomy. When dream-helpers propose an assistant plan, three hundred live audience members can decide whether to approve or reject it, but both neoliberal rationale and sentimental discourses expressed by dream-seekers have hijacked the will of dream-helpers and dream-juries on the basis of moral common ground shaped by the ‘China Dream’ and ‘harmonious society’ political ideals. On the one side, sponsors in the role of dream-helpers pay for the presence of their representatives in the show, where they hope assistant plans are commonly associated with their own brand images and even products themselves. In Yang’s case, the representative of the online shopping website ‘Best1’ mentions not only financial support but also suggests running an online store. Therefore, proposing assistance plans is an indirect advertising method integrated into the show’s content. On the other side, the sentimental degree might become a decisive standard for evaluating dreams, directly impacting the final result. Facing vulnerable dream-seekers expressing the difficulties of their lives, dream-helpers are bound to make generous decisions, largely because they are under the surveillance of the public. Inspired by this kind of emotional atmosphere, most live audiences aid dream-seekers in doing a good deed by voting. As a result, a
predictable happy ending almost becomes the norm of the dream narratives in the show. The main selling point of the show is articulation of one story after another between neoliberal rationality and sentimentality within the moral logic of the ‘China Dream’.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter sheds light on the cultural reorientation of talent shows as articulated around the official ‘China Dream’ discourse. Two discursive formulas, ‘good persons’ and ‘public interests’, epitomise the transformation of talent shows and how they pursue political correctness away from the intellectual critique of cultural vulgarity. As the ‘China Dream’ motto indicates, the party-state inserts Confucianism and nationalism into governing the potential or already extant ideological conflict between the state and individuals. The party-ordained moral order furthermore creates socialist narratives using neoliberal mechanisms in the landscape of the state-controlled market economy. By expanding upon the vision of ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’, the party-state has used entertainment television programmes to convey a grand imagination and to consolidate the legitimacy of its rule. Especially, at a time when the Western-invented genre centred on neoliberal individualistic values inspired the people to consider the possibility of social change, the state-owned television stations have undertaken the cultural-political responsibility of reclaiming and rebuilding the function of talent shows. In this sense, ‘good persons’ and ‘public interests’ portray the idealised moral universe that the party-state expects. Consequently, these two formulas indicate that this Western-invented genre has been assimilated into the party-state ideological agenda forcing this lucrative business into complying with SARFT’s censorship and regulation.

It is also of importance that talent shows are compellingly articulated in the dream narratives. In articulating a unified striving for the ‘China Dream’, talent shows connect the dreams of individuals with national pride and humiliation. However, dream narratives have increasingly become dissociated from realistic
dilemmas people actually face in their daily lives. While these inspiring dream stories are thoroughly integrated into the collective imagination of the ‘China Dream’, talent shows have served as a prescription to relieving the complicated social contradictions that have arisen during a prolonged and dramatic transformation of Chinese society. This is due to not only the party-state ideological will, but also the audience-centred predicament of neoliberal television entertainment with Chinese characteristics. Here, we have witnessed the ways in which China’s talent shows have made efforts to cater to the party-state ideological apparatus’s needs, while maintaining the appeal of the genre by narrating sensational stories. In the next chapter, I concentrate on professional talent shows as a variant of China’s talent shows that has seen an aesthetic move from grassroots to professionalism.
Chapter 4 I Am a Singer: Articulating the benevolent ‘music arena’ in professional talent shows

The singing talent show genre has seen a resurgence beginning in 2012 after the first wave provoked by HNSTV’s Super Girl Voice in the mid-2000s. The new trend is closely linked to two high-profile franchised singing talent shows. One is The Voice of China, which premiered on ZJSTV in 2012, as I have analysed in the previous chapter, and another is I Am a Singer (Woshi geshou, 2013-present) produced and broadcast on HNSTV. In comparison to Super Girl Voice, these two talent shows are restricted to competition between talented singers, rather than being open to the general populace like some other shows. While The Voice of China mainly features unknown talented singing novices, I Am a Singer is a reality talent show where many famous talented singers and even pop stars seriously compete. It is best to refer to this form as ‘a professional talent show’. I Am a Singer is not a unique case in this respect. Other relatively high-profile professional singing talent shows include King of The Mask (Mengmian gewang, 2015-present), The Ultimate Entertainer (Quanneng xingzhan, 2013), Sound of War (Tianlai zhizhan, 2016-present), and Sound of Dream (Mengxiang de shengyin, 2016-present). As a genre, these shows have extended to dramatic performance, such as Top Funny Comedian (Huanle xijuren, 2015-present), and The Birth of a Performer (Yanyuan de dansheng, 2017-present).

In parallel to the discursive invasion of the official ‘China Dream’ ideal discussed in the previous chapter, the emergence and popularity of professional talent shows indicates another radical transformation of the talent show genre from an original grassroots cultural complex to exquisite professionalism. The new trend demonstrates that the party-state’s cultural-moral governance on talent shows is an officially systematic project that relies on both media institutions and cultural elites as a transborder Chinese cultural-linguistic professional community. With the collapse of the original democratic implications and grassroots spirit of the talent show genre, its cultural residue has gradually turned out to be a new
profitable joint venture between the ideological state apparatus, highly-commercialised media and elite professional singers.

*I Am a Singer* is a product of the tripartite cultural-political collusion between the party-state, media enterprises and professional singers. More concretely, the collusion structure epitomises two intertwined aspects. First, with regards to SARFT’s regulators, the talent show genre itself as a form of media art is not fundamental to the intellectual accusation of cultural vulgarity when it is not used to sabotage the established moral order dominated by the party-state. Therefore, while the production team makes a political and economic calculation by incorporating celebrity effect into the audience appeal of the talent show genre with the ups and downs of narrative suspense, almost all competing professional singers in *I Am a Singer* are homogeneously portrayed as members of the professional community who have ‘real music, true strength and genuine emotion’. They exist within a benevolent moral universe that obeys the party-ordained moral agenda. In a materialistic society where individual choices have exponentially expanded within the authoritarian political system, *I Am a Singer* features musical celebrities who play exemplary roles in practising party-ordained morality labelled as professional quality (zhuan ye suyang). The show is intended to construct the politically correct landscape known as the ‘Chinese-language pop music arena’ (huayu liuxing yuetan). This landscape dissociates from a vanity fair in the context of neoliberal market economy.

Moreover, *I Am a Singer* is oriented along the lines of exquisite professionalism that contributes to the party-state ‘cultural stepping-out’ strategy. The strategy demonstrates that the party-state ideological struggles for cultural hegemony are targeted at not only quieting down domestic ideological conflicts but also exporting its own ideology as widely as possible. Admittedly, *I Am a Singer* is franchised from the programme of the same name of the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) in South Korea. However, partially because of casting many renowned singers from Hong Kong and Taiwan, its first season was sensational in these two culturally Chinese places (Cheung, 2017; E. J. Zhao, 2016, p. 56). This is an unusual cultural transformation, especially when one
considers that Chinese popular cultural products and discourses had long been captured by a periphery-centre model that harnessed a unidirectional flow from Hong Kong and Taiwan to the mainland. In particular, the non-mainlander singers who seek opportunities to break into the mainland’s massive market must subject themselves to the cultural-moral governance and economic collusion of the mainland’s state-owned commercial media, such as HNSTV in this case. The ‘Chinese-language pop music arena’ no longer serves as an exclusive target of the party-state governance, but rather as a party-state governing tool used to ‘tell China’s story properly’ and implicitly to the periphery Chinese regions and beyond; however, the communication effect might sometimes be contrary to its original intention. In featuring famous talented singers in the historical and transnational context of the Chinese-language popular music arena to displace unknown amateurs in the talent show genre, *I Am a Singer* has expressed an ambition to develop in the periphery markets. Perhaps more saliently, it seeks to penetrate Chinese-language markets abroad in the mission of an official ‘cultural stepping-out’ strategy. The idea is to sell cultural goods made in China in the name of promoting Chinese culture.

This chapter concentrates on *I Am a Singer* and the two intertwined aspects of the collusion structure between the party-state, media and professional singers. I will begin with an analysis of the ‘music arena’ that is part of the Chinese cultural-linguistic market and how the party-state’s cultural-moral governance manipulates the market to seek out and shape common interests with cultural elites. The following two sections elaborate on the win-win lucrative model of *I Am a Singer* between HNSTV and competing professional singers, as well as the discourse of the ‘benevolent’ music arena articulated in an appealing and politically correct way. After that, I develop Jacques Attali’s ‘repetition of music’ to critically reflect on the capitalist nature of the singing talent show genre and the limitations of exquisite professionalism in that context. At the end of this chapter, I analyse how Taiwanese intellectuals understand the rise and influence of China’s media industry, as conveyed in the sensation around the first season of *I Am a Singer* in Taiwan. I specifically consider how they alternatively interpret the classic representation of the benevolent music arena.
4.1 The cultural-moral governance in collusion with the ‘music arena’

*I Am a Singer*, as an example of professional talent shows, is closely related to the collective professional fields of music referred to as *yuetan* (music arena), and *yinyue jie* (music realm) or *yinyue quan* (music circle) in Chinese. In her study of *shitan* (poetry arena), Heather Inwood (2014) suggests that these affixes, including *jie*, *tan* and *quan*, involve ‘an assortment of people who share an interest in a particular area of culture and who come together to create and evaluate the contents of their chosen cultural form’ (p. 12). Correspondingly, it is possible to argue that all involved musicians, including singers, composers, lyricists, record producers and instrument players, are part of the music realm, music circle, or music arena. One can intersectionally divide the three terms into a variety of smaller professional fields aligned with factors such as languages, music types, singing styles, territories, and time spans. The three affixes are commonly interchangeable with relatively value-neutral meanings, but their word formation and pragmatics differ (Fu, 2008, pp. 79-82). *Jie* (realm) and *quan* (circle) can form three-syllable terms with disyllabic Chinese words related to professional fields, such as *yinyue* (music), *dianying* (cinema), *dianshi* (television), *wenxue* (literature), *yishu* (art), *tiyu* (sport) and *wenyi* (literature and art). In contrast, *tan* (arena) is only the affix of disyllabic terms with different monosyllabic prefixes that one can abbreviate from the aforementioned nouns about professional fields. As far as combined words with music are concerned, the term ‘music realm’ is a relatively formal word that emphasises official or academic background. The term ‘music circle’ implies the exclusion of professional interpersonal relationships. The original meaning of *tan* is a raised earthen or stone platform that served as a location for grand rituals, such as religious sacrifice or mass pledging. By combining *tan* with *yue* abbreviated from *yinyue*, the term ‘music arena’ metaphorically refers to the somewhat competitive field where musicians and/or their works are officially or commercially labelled with a tone of elitism, or as I term it here: ‘exquisite professionalism’. Therefore, the ‘music arena’ is often contextualised in music competitions, ceremonies, evaluations, or other related occasions that ‘both reflect existing power relations and exert an effect on social relations by producing power’ (Inwood, 2014, p. 12).
The ‘Chinese-language popular music arena’ (\textit{huayu liuxing yuetan}) is articulated in the context of the historical cultural affinity of mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and beyond. The centre of Chinese-language popular culture historically transferred from Shanghai to Hong Kong, so Hong Kong and Taiwan dominated the market until the rise of the mainland in a networked, transnational order. The beginning of Chinese-language popular culture in the context of capitalist modernity is dateable to the 1920s and 1930s in Shanghai. By the 1920s, Shanghai became the cultural centre, complete with large concentrations and gatherings of cultural elites, artists and intellectuals. Li Jinhui, the ‘father of Chinese popular music’, created \textit{shidaiqu} (literally, ‘music of the time’) as a fusion of Chinese folk and Western jazz (Baranovitch, 2003; Lau, 2008, p. 106; Moskowitz, 2010, pp. 16-17). The once-booming popular culture industry of Shanghai gradually waned during the warlord period from the late 1930s to the 1940s. In this time, many cultural elites relocated to Hong Kong. As the mainland and Taiwan were steeped in totalitarian political chaos, Hong Kong, then a British colony, became the new centre. Hong Kong is a Cantonese society, but Mandarin films and popular songs were the mainstream genres of the flourishing entertainment industry from the 1950s to the mid-1960s. Cantonese-language popular culture in Hong Kong arose with the founding of the Cantonese-aired television company TVB in the late 1960s. Starting in the 1970s, Hong Kong found itself sharing its hegemony with Taiwan as embodied in ‘\textit{Gang-Tai}’, a widely used contraction of two Chinese words \textit{Xianggang} (Hong Kong) and Taiwan (Gold, 1993, p. 907; Moskowitz, 2011, p. 8). The overwhelmingly unidirectional flow of Chinese-language popular culture from the geographically peripheral \textit{Gang-Tai} into the mainland was a distinct feature of Chinese culture from the 1980s to the 1990s (Gold, 1993, pp. 913, 923). More mainlanders slowly gained access to smuggled or copied cassettes, or listened to shortwave radio programmes transmitted into mainland China (Brace, 1991, p. 41; Yong Zhao & Zhu, 2014, p. 9). The widespread popularity of Teng Li-jun, a singer from Taiwan, on the mainland can be examined from a saying of the time: ‘Old Deng [Xiaoping] rules by day, little Teng/Deng [Lijun] rules by night’ (Baranovitch, 2003, pp. 11-12; Gold, 1993, p. 909). The influx of \textit{Gang-Tai} pop songs caused massive shocks alongside intellectual accusations of ‘yellow songs’, ‘vulgar songs’ and ‘decadent sounds’ (\textit{mimizhiyin}) (Yong Zhao & Zhu, 2014, p. 10). However, many \textit{Gang-Tai}
stars gained fame in China through appearances on state-owned media, though their censored performances mainly served the propaganda needs of the ‘Greater China’ ideology under the supervision of mainland authorities. Although pirated and smuggled copies, such as tapes, CDs, DVDs, and online songs flooded the market from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, many Gang-Tai pop stars continued actively expanding the mainland market by holding concerts, participating in commercial activities, selling their records, endorsing products, and so on (De Kloet, 2005).

The concept of the ‘music arena’ is framed around the inextricable relationship between the ‘cultural-linguistic market’ and ‘popular music’, as the latter is regarded as one of the corresponding cultural goods of the former. I argue that the music arena is a cultural-linguistic professional community within the ‘Chinese cultural-linguistic market’ that has particular emphasis on Appadurai’s ethnoscape concept (Appadurai, 1996; Y. Zhu, 2008b, pp. 71-72). The music arena is juxtaposed with other cultural fields within a broader professional network known as the ‘Chinese-language entertainment circle’ (huayu yule quan) in the cultural-linguistic market. The transnational Chinese-language market covers mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia, as well as diasporic Chinese communities because of ‘sharing similar languages as well as intertwined histories and overlapping cultural characteristics’ (McAnany & Wilkinson, 1996, p. 16). Owing to the history of production, distribution and cooperation, the main body of the market is made up by China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, often called liang’an sandi, literally meaning ‘three regions on two sides of the Taiwan Strait’. The term ‘Greater China’ also describes Chinese-language countries and regions as a whole. It may include liang’an sandi or sometimes more places because the concept is dynamically definable (Xuelin Zhou, 2016, p. 11). Because of frequently transnational co-productions between Chinese-language countries and regions, these concepts crystallise the discussion of cultural flows within the cultural-linguistic market in various discourses.

The party-state has deliberately manipulated the logic of the neoliberal market as embodied by the law of the jungle, where the strong prey on the weak –
in this case by colluding with state-controlled commercial outlets and cultural-linguistic professional communities, represented by the ‘musical arena’ in this chapter. The logic is as follows: while the huge market provides a hotbed of proliferating production costs, high-quality programmes with big budgets boost audience ratings and advertising revenues. At the same time, high profits promote further rounds of media production. On the premise of complying with party-state regulation and censorship, the highly commercialised mainland media considers Gang-Tai talent and performers to be lucrative human resources. For Gang-Tai media and cultural practitioners, the mainland is a huge and promising cultural market with a population of over a billion. Because of the cultural-linguistic affinity between the regions, they are more likely to succeed in the mainland than other non-Chinese-speaking countries. Many Gang-Tai artists have thus paid more attention to the mainland market, and some are devoted only to the market at the expense of their original Gang-Tai markets. I have dubbed this ‘the cultural-moral governance of the cultural-linguistic market’.

When a large amount of professional talent and funds from Hong Kong and Taiwan entered the mainland’s huge market, the cultural flow brought about a transition from a centred international order to a networked transnational order (Berry, 2010, p. 124; E. J. Zhao, 2016, pp. 57-59). The transition did not happen overnight, though; it ‘develop[ed] out of rather than against the international order of nation states’ (Berry, 2010, p. 120). The emergence of the transnational order does not mean that all cultural production and consumption is totally divorced from the borders of nation states. Instead, transborder cultural activities have indeed grown out ‘of the conditions of globalisation, shaped by neo-liberalism, “free trade”, the collapse of socialism, and post-Fordist production’ (Berry, 2010, p. 112). Remaining blind to neoliberal capitalism as the main political-economic force of globalisation means lacking a full understanding of the values and operations of the transnational order, as well as its historical formation. The active involvement of Gang-Tai pop culture industries in the mainland spurred the rise of the latter by strengthening their cooperative relationship in the Chinese-language market. One of the most representative examples is the long-term cooperation of the ‘Chiung Yao’ series (Qiong Yao ju) between the mainland’s
HNSTV and Taiwan’s team from 1990 to 2013. During the process, the mainland team from HNSTV moved from a supporting role to dominating the production and distribution of the ‘Chiung Yao’ series. The provincial television station grew into a flagship media conglomerate, Hunan Broadcasting System, with generating over 10 billion Chinese yuan annually by 2011 (CNR, 2011). The case is only the tip of the iceberg regarding the exchange and cooperation of film and television industries in the cultural-linguistic market. The intertwined cooperation relationship between liang’an sandi also manifests in the convergence of media discourse, exemplified by recent Chinese-language films wherein it is sometimes difficult to identify the differing regional styles or to classify a movie’s nationality or region of production (Berry, 2010, pp. 117-118; Y. Zhang, 1998, p. 64).

The party-state has increasingly dominated the networked industry order of the cultural-linguistic market by manipulating the cultural-moral governance to integrate human and financial resources into the expansion of the party’s moral values. By controlling transnational or transborder cooperation, this convergence toward the interests of the mainland is bound to exclude dissent from the market. Saskia Sassen (2006) contends:

A good part of globalisation consists of an enormous variety of micro-processes that begin to denationalize what had been constructed as national — whether policies, capital, political subjectivity, urban spaces, temporal frames, or any other of a variety of dynamics and domains. (p. 1)

Regarding the networked transnational order in the Chinese cultural-linguistic market as a micro-process of globalisation, the party-state means for its cultural-moral governance to dominate the industry level of the order and renationalise the corresponding cultural practitioners within the party-ordained moral framework.

37 Chiung Yao (1938–) is a Chinese-language writer based in Taiwan. Born in Mainland China, she moved to Taiwan with her parents in 1949. The majority of her compositions feature romantic stories with intensive emotional conflicts. Her novels had successfully been adapted for films and swept across Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s, before she started the long-term collaboration with HNSTV (C. Chen, 2011, pp. 21-22).
Admittedly, *Gang-Tai* popular culture has loosened the discursive hegemony of the party-state and its systems (Gold, 1993, p. 925). However, the party-state has adopted a two-handed way to incorporate *Gang-Tai* media and cultural professionals interested in developing their careers on the mainland to accommodate the existing system of cultural-moral governance. On the one hand, official regulators treat them as equal to the mainland’s entertainers and artists to supervise their personal morality in their works and even daily lives. In September 2014, the SAPPRFT issued a ‘Circular on Strengthening Management of the Production and Dissemination of Radio and Television Programmes, Film and Television Dramas and Online Audiovisual Programmes’. The circular is widely called ‘a ban on tainted stars’ (*fengsha lieji yiren*). The concept of ‘tainted stars’ refers primarily to the stars who have been investigated and penalised by public security organs because of their use of drugs, solicitation of prostitutes and engagement in other illegal and criminal acts. In its circular, the SAPPRFT accused them of ‘harming the image of the cultural industry and ‘setting a bad example for young people.’ The ban ordered all media outlets to suspend broadcasting any work featuring ‘tainted stars’ and forbade organisations from inviting them to participate in producing radio and television programmes. For example, because Ko Chen-tung, an actor from Taiwan, was arrested by the Beijing police for drug use in 2014, the blockbuster *Tiny Times 4 (Xiao shidai 4)* chose not to feature him, going so far as to cut and reshoot his scenes (Scmp, 2014).

On the other hand, *Gang-Tai* artists are situated in a paradoxical place in the mainland’s market. While the mainland’s audience has long been instilled with the official ‘Greater China’ idea, making it accustomed to regarding it as integral to domestic culture, the SARFT and its successors brought *Gang-Tai* cultural affairs into the category of overseas cultural exchange and cooperation. Its

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38 The document is titled ‘guanyu jiaqiang youguan guangbo dianshi jiemu, yingshiju he wangluo shiting jiemu zhizuo chuanbo guanli de tongzhi’ [Circular on Strengthening Management of the Production and Dissemination of Radio and Television Programmes, Film and Television Dramas and Online Audiovisual Programmes]. chinafilms.net. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20180330172020/http://www.chinafilms.net/news_detail/newsId=335.html (last accessed 17 April 2019).
institutional setting reflects this in that the Office of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan is affiliated with the Department of International Cooperation. This means that SARFT’s regulations categorise Gang-Tai media and cultural practitioners as overseas personnel (jingwai renyuan, literally ‘people outside a country's borders’) together with those of foreign countries. The result is that any Gang-Tai artist or organisation participating in the production of films, radio and television programs requires official approval. As a result, Gang-Tai media members are bound to comply with the party-state strict administration. The political and ideological tendencies of Gang-Tai artists have long been the most important condition examined by the authorities and the mainland’s audience. For instance, the label ‘pro-Taiwanese independence artists’ (taidu yiren) is a nightmare for any individual or organisation interested in mainland market success. To cater to the needs of the mainland market, Taiwanese singers who are devoted to the larger market do not publicly support Taiwanese independence. Otherwise, the government would ban them from working in China. Sometimes, the mainland’s internet users voluntarily launch online campaigns to resist artists who support Taiwanese independence or otherwise disagree with the mainland government on sensitive political issues. This trend can be captured from a popular online saying in the mainland that ‘no pop idol [can stand] in front of national interests’ (guojia mianqian wu ouxiang).

The party-state cultural-moral governance struggles against domestic ideological hegemony as influx of other culture increases, as discussed in Chapter 2; however, this form of governance also promotes the party-state’s own values beyond borders as demonstrated by the launch of the ‘cultural stepping-out’ strategy (wenhua zouchuqu zhanlue). The official strategy is traceable back to Jiang Zemin’s Report at the Sixteenth National Party Congress in 2002 at the end of his leadership. In 2011, the sixth plenary session of the 17th CPC central committee passed a ‘Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Major Issues

Pertaining to Deepening Reform of the Cultural System and Promoting the Great Development and Flouring of Social Culture’. That moment officially coined and proposed the ‘cultural stepping-out’ strategy to enhance the international influence of Chinese culture.\(^4\) The strategy contains two stages, extending from ‘knowing and being familiar with’ Chinese culture to ‘understanding and accepting’ it (Xinyan Wang, 2016). Before the campaign for promoting the internationalisation of Chinese culture, it is important to consider how the mainland firstly establishes its central role in the Chinese-language cultural-linguistic market.

The ‘cultural stepping-out’ strategy reflects the political intention of ‘governing external society through culture’. The party-state has tentatively extended its effective governance on the cultural-linguistic market to cultural-moral governance by the market on the basis of the common interests between the ideological state apparatus and highly commercialised media and elite cultural communities. *I Am a Singer* is the product of the collusion structure in that it goes about featuring professional singers in a profitable mechanism. The emergence and popularity of the professional talent show is echoed in the recent official Chinese state attitude towards cultural hegemony: since 2014, President Xi Jinping has added the concept of ‘cultural confidence’ (wenhua zixin) to the previous ‘three confidences’ proposed by Hu Jintao: ‘confidence in the [socialist] road’, ‘confidence in the [socialist] theory’ and ‘confidence in the [socialist] system’ (Xinhuanet, 2016).

*I Am a Singer* has confirmed the official ambition of socialist cultural confidence through two aspects, completing the transformation from the target and tool of cultural-moral governance. First, the exquisite professionalism highlighted by the professional talent show is simply at odds with the previous grassroots complex incarnated in *Super Girl Voice*. The representation of the

music arena in *I Am a Singer* serves as a discursive construction of the party-state cultural hegemony in the historical and cultural context of Greater China. The talent show genre has hardly functioned as a cultural imagination of social mobility, yet it has created a cultural or entertainment illusion about singing and dancing to extol the good times in an implicit way with the grand narrative of the rise of China. In other words, competing singers as a group of professional cultural elitists set an example for the Greater China public as the practitioners of the party-ordained benevolent moral order. Second, China’s media outlets have recently started to play an increasingly significant role in the Chinese-language popular culture that *Gang-Tai* had long dominated. The production and creativity of the mainland’s music industry continue to have an obvious disparity with those of its *Gang-Tai* counterparts. In light of the rise of the mainland’s gigantic market, the situation of the music arena is repeating itself. The representation and imagination of the music arena has been embedded in the cultural-political structure of the mainland because of its industry combination with state-owned media as manifested in *I Am a Singer*.

In addition, the internet has facilitated the communication of entertainment television programmes in the cultural-linguistic market; it is in this sense that the market has not been limited to movies, television dramas, and popular songs. Since the mid-2000s, the development of the internet has stretched popular genres in the linguistic-cultural market to encompass television entertainment programmes as well. Before the era of the internet, the receiving range of television channels was heavily restricted to corresponding territorial broadcast policies, making it difficult for television programmes to communicate across borders. For example, as one of these ‘informal and sometimes illegal’ routes, the online mechanism of peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing has bred many organised online volunteer communities, such as *zimu zu* (literally, ‘subtitling groups’). Such online labour volunteers translate foreign media content into Chinese and then upload the works to the internet (Kung, 2016; Meng, 2012, p. 467). In contrast, there is practically no cultural-linguistic barrier for the mainland’s internet users to acquire access to Taiwan’s entertainment television programmes. For instance, *Kangsi Coming* (*Kangxi laile*, 2004–2016), a Taiwanese variety
show, was one of the most popular entertainment programmes in the Chinese cultural-linguistic market (Cai, 2015; Jia Liu, 2006, p. 80). Its success indicates the potential of entertainment programmes in the market. In comparison, the mainland’s media has paid much more attention to the format trade with foreign media and the creative development of programming formats since the 2010s. Simultaneously, Taiwan’s entertainment television market has gradually waned. Increasingly, its media and creative talents in the field of entertainment programmes have gone westward as missing out on work opportunities has become more common (E. J. Zhao, 2016, pp. 56-60). This new trend has predicted the rise and ‘stepping out’ of China’s entertainment television programmes as represented by *I Am a Singer* in the Gang-Tai region and beyond. As we shall see in the final section of this chapter, the actual result of the ‘cultural stepping-out’ strategy may be far from satisfactory for the party-state’s ambitions. After all, the cultural-political contexts in which external audiences are immersed stand in stark contrast to the logic of cultural-moral governance. Before embarking on an exploration of this process, I begin by analysing the collusion structure and discourse of *I Am a Singer*.

### 4.2 I Am a Singer: Singing as lucrative business

*I Am a Singer* has broadcast six seasons as of May 2018. With the fifth season being renamed *Singer 2017*, the series was rebranded due to the banning of Korean-related cultural products and brands. Even so, the producers have not changed its format substantively. Each episode features seven or eight professional talented singers who must compete among each other in a studio outfitted with state-of-the-art equipment, as well as 500 live audience members who help determine the results. Every season contains thirteen or fourteen episodes with three to five regular rounds, a breakout round (*fuhuosai*) and a final round (*zongjuesai*). Each regular round includes a ‘qualifier’ episode and a ‘knockout’ episode (*paiming sai* and *taotai sai*). Every contestant must sing one song for every episode. At the end of each episode, Hong Tao, chief director of the series, announces two ranking results: one voted by the competitors with regards to each other and the other voted by 500 live audience members. While
the first one is only a reference, the second involves decisive ranking of each episode. The singer with the lowest combined ranking result of the qualifier and knockout episodes is eliminated. The eliminated singer may take part in the breakout round. Since the third season, most regular rounds have added a challenge episode (tiaozhansai) after the qualifier and knockout episodes. The challenge episode is an elimination competition in which the show invites a challenger with less than a ten-year career to compete with the other six remaining singers. If the challenger can defeat at least three singers, he or she can substitute for the lowest place contestant (the person with the fewest votes) to take part in the following regular rounds. All failed challengers are entitled to participate in the breakout round. The competition rules for selecting seven finalists vary every season. In the first season, the seven finalists were composed of the six remaining singers after the knockout episode of the last regular round and a singer who won in the breakout episode. Starting in the second season, all those who survive from the first to the last regular rounds gain automatic entry into the final round. Other than the singers who withdraw, the other singers had to participate in the breakout round to compete for the remaining quota of the final round where all finalists sing two to three songs for the ‘singing king’ (gewang) title of the season, which is determined by live audience.

While many previous talent shows created pop idols from grassroots contestants, I Am a Singer places professional singers in a talented-search format where live audiences rank performances. Before the broadcast of every season, the starting list of entries for the show is a focal point of public opinion because it is the core originality of the format in which famous professional singers seriously compete with each other. Almost all contestants in the show are widely recognised as talented and skilled singers (shilipai geshou). In the Chinese context, another counterpart concept is ‘idolised singers’ (ouxiangpai geshou) – a term that refers to those drawing upon their appearance rather than singing strength to achieve success. Some of them double as talented singers and pop idols, but singing strength is the core factor of entry into this particular show.
Moreover, the show empowers 500 live audience members to decide the results of the competition. The panel of judges is evenly divided into five groups on the basis of their ages: teens, twenties, thirties, forties and those who are over fifty. All of them are recruited via the official webpage of the show. According to the official application system of the fourth season, applicants fill in their personal information, upload three regular everyday photos (shenghuo zhao), and then answer the below questions:

1. Who is your favourite singer?
2. What is your favourite song? Why?
3. What do you think is the most needed [element] as a singer?
4. What kinds of singers’ performances on the scene can gain your votes?
5. What is your reason for applying for participating in the show?
6. If you were a judge on the scene of I Am a Singer, please comment on the singer as shown in the video.

With the above questions being concerned about personal aesthetics and music appreciation abilities of applicants, I Am a Singer establishes a serious screening process, and ensures appropriate audience judges come from a large pool of applicants. As Hong Tao revealed to the media, the number of applicants in the first season totalled more than 300,000 (QQ, 2015). The screening team rejected the applicants with incomplete or untrue personal information, as well as anyone likely to be fans of a singer. The team then conducted telephone interviews with the rest of the applicants to further detect whether they were qualified to be judges on the show. Finally, the team made appointments with suitable candidates as judges and confirmed the final schedule for participating in the show’s recordings. For every episode, between the completion of all singing performances and the announcement of results, the show broadcasts the process of casting and counting votes.

In addition, I Am a Singer features a variety of supporting characters, including musical brokers and commentators. A group of HNSTV’s hosts from

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other entertainment programmes features as musical brokers of singers. At the end of the first episode of every season, each contestant establishes a cooperative relationship by two-way choice with one of several well-known entertainment presenters from HNSTV who act as musical brokers (jingjiren S1-S4) or musical partners (yinyue hehuoren in S5-S6). In the show, the musical brokers function as a bridge between singers and the production team, as well as between singers and home audiences. A musical broker represents the production team and accompanies the corresponding singer throughout the show, helping singers maintain communication and coordination with producers over specific issues, such as rules, song-selections, and rehearsals. Conversations between musical brokers and singers on the show often present the moods, feelings, emotions and thoughts of singers. In addition, there is a panel of commentators consisting of university professors, DJs, record producers, music critics, and veteran composers who are experienced in the Chinese-language pop music arena. Though these commentators are without decision-making power, they serve as opinion leaders on the show, since they speak from position of industry authority. Their comments serve to contextualise performances; the show typically intersperses such comments throughout every episode, and they involve singing skills, competitive levels displayed in the show, and competing singer and song backgrounds.

*I Am a Singer* is a win-win lucrative business for the production team and contestants. To HNSTV, this professional talent show is a profitable commodity. The business strategies adopted by this show share three main characteristics with the lucrative convention of reality shows elaborated by Ted Magder, including ‘the increased use of product placement, the expansion of merchandising tie-ins, and the extensive use of new interactive technologies outside the confines of the TV set’ (2004, pp. 148-151). For example, *I Am a Singer* is inundated with product placement. HNSTV has sold the exclusive naming rights to Liby Laundry Detergent from the first to the third seasons and Satine Organic Milk from the fourth to the sixth seasons for sky-high prices (W. Jiang, 2013; People, 2016). Satine, a sub-brand of Yili Group, paid 600 million Chinese yuan for the naming rights of the fourth season. As such, high naming fees have helped *I Am a Singer*
cover its production costs, and various kinds of product placement for the generous sponsors are present in the show. For example, at the beginning of the first episode of the fourth season, all contestants must drink a cup of Satine Organic Milk as a way of drawing lots to decide the performing order of the episode, which is printed on the bottom of the cup. It can only be seen once the liquid is drained. The second business strategy is to develop merchandising tie-ins with *I Am a Singer*. In the first season, the show, in cooperation with Wanda Cinemas, launched a live broadcast of the final at cinemas in 11 cities (People, 2013a). In 2016, after the end of the fourth season, the production team invited some competing singers to hold four live concerts in Hangzhou, Beijing, Nanchang and Chongqing (ChinaDaily, 2016). Third, *I Am a Singer* extends to new media so as to increase audience viscosity. The production team has actively applied social media such as Weibo to promote every episode leading up to the broadcast and to interact with home audiences, even developing its own official mobile application where subscribers can read inside news, submit applications to join the live audience, and speak with competing singers and other fans in the chatrooms (H. Bai & Zhang, 2016; Shi & Guo, 2014; Su, 2014). YouTube has been blocked in China since 2009 (Breslin & Shen, 2010), but it is somewhat ironic that HNSTV uploads all episodes to its official YouTube channel, allowing it to exploit the overseas Chinese cultural-linguistic media market. With the increase in the size of overseas audiences, another important business strategy of *I Am a Singer* is to sell television broadcast rights for different overseas territories. For the first five seasons, HNSTV sold its broadcast rights to other Chinese-language television stations in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, the USA and Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, HNSTV also profits from selling online audio copyrights to some musical websites.

For professional singers, there are different personal considerations for taking part in *I Am a Singer*. Regardless of whether the singers are popular, everyone benefits from this professional talent show. I divide the ensemble into three main parts based on professional seniority. The first category is a group of veteran singers with significant reputations in the arena of Chinese-language popular music, such as Chyi Chin, Han Hong, Sun Nan, Ku Kui-Kei, Han Lei,
Joey Yung, Coco Lee, Chang Shin-Che, Sandy Lam and Wang Feng. Due to their high-profile achievements, they are qualified as judges of other talent shows. For example, Han Hong and Coco Lee are the judges of *Chinese Idol* and Chyi Chin and Wang Feng are the judges of *The Voice of China*. These major names are one of the main attractions in the show. Correspondingly, this means that the production team must pay high appearance fees. For example, according to an unverified online report, Joey Yung, a Hong Kong pop singer, might earn up to 1.5 million Chinese yuan per episode (Sina, 2016). Second, this show is an opportunity for senior singers who have not performed in recent years to regain attention from fans and the media. Huang Qishan is a good example of this kind of comeback story. Before taking part in the first season of the show in 2013, the forty-five-year-old singer had disappeared from the public for over a decade. On the show, she successfully and emotionally covered Chang Hui-Mei’s lyrical song *Cutting off the Love* (*Jian’ài*). In particular, her emotional performance was salient because the song was written by her ex-husband Tu Hui-Yuan after their breakup (NetEase, 2013). With her singing ability and legendary comeback story, Huang Qishan’s popularity gained momentum and soared after the broadcast of the first season.

The third group of singers consists of some relatively junior talented singers who have become professional pop singers and released their own records for less than decade. Some of them made their debuts and achieved good results in other talent shows, such as Zhang Liangying, Zhou Bichang, Tan Weiwei, Lee Kar Wei and Hsu Jia-Ying. In the third season, the production team creatively recruited the contestants of the challenge episodes using the popular Chinese social media service Weibo. In December 2014, Li Ronghao was the first singer to sign up for the challenge episodes on Weibo before successfully appearing in the third episode of the third season (Sina, 2014b). Meanwhile, more than 60 junior singers also signed up.\(^{43}\) They even contain many successful contestants from ZJSTV’s *The Voice of China*, which is widely regarded as the most important rival of *I Am

\(^{43}\) See details: https://archive.org/details/Www.weibo.com3166262701BDx074DQxtypecomment_rnd1555496537255 (last accessed 17 April 2019).
a Singer.\textsuperscript{44} Therefore, from December 2014 to January 2015, Mango TV, the new media platform of HNSTV, produced an online affiliated talent show, \textit{I Am a Singer–Ready to Challenge}, which became the preliminary contest of the fourth season.\textsuperscript{45} Jin Zhiwen, who became famous for winning the fourth place of the first season of \textit{The Voice of China} in 2012, stood out from fifty other singers and secured an official position of the fourth season of \textit{I Am a Singer}. This was a hard-fought opportunity, especially for a junior singer. Jin’s career successfully made a giant step forward when he matched with other veterans on the same stage. Considering this in itself was a major achievement, the final results of the show were of relatively little importance to him.

Other than being divided by their seniority, all singers are categorised by their nationalities. There have been 76 singers or bands appearing in the series up to the sixth season, including from Mainland China (40), Taiwan (16), Hong Kong (9), Malaysia (5), South Korea (2), Singapore (1), Kazakhstan (1), the UK (1), and the Philippines (1). Such an internationalised line-up indicates that \textit{I Am a Singer} addresses not only the Chinese mainland market but also overseas Chinese-speaking communities. The show’s producers made a deliberate calculation to invite Gang-Tai pop singers from the perspective of the production team. Gang-Tai pop singers play a crucial role in developing Chinese-language pop music. Without their participation and appearances, the public and even many intellectuals and the media would not conceive of the competition as ‘an annual important event for Chinese-language popular music arena’ (\textit{huayu yuetan de niandu shengshi}) as advocated by HNSTV. In addition, \textit{I Am a Singer} started inviting non-Chinese-language singers beginning in the second season, including Malaysian Malayan singer Shila Amzah (S2), two Korean singers, Jeong Soon-won (S3) and Hwang Chi Yeul (S4), the Kazakh singer Dimash Kudaibergen (S5), the British pop star Jessie J (S6), and the Filipino singer KZ Tandingan (S6).\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44} See details: https://archive.org/details/Www.weibo.com1746580461BDgprxrOJtypecomment_rnd1555494772391 (last accessed 17 April 2019).

\textsuperscript{45} See the official website of this programme: http://www.mgtv.com/v/2015/wsgstg/ (last accessed 17 April 2019)

\textsuperscript{46} Another four singers from Malaysia, Gary Chaw (S2), Wong Pin Kuan (S2), Lee Kar Wei (S3), and
These singers were already well-known for their singing talents in their own countries and corresponding cultural-linguistic markets before taking part in *I Am a Singer*. This has been a win-win situation for both HNSTV and these foreigner singers. While this process is a shortcut and opportunity for the singers to enter the huge Chinese market, the production team anchors its hope on hunting top-tier talented singers who can rival those Chinese-language veterans to create compelling entertainment topics. As an attempt to enhance cultural exchange between China and the rest of the world, *I Am a Singer* employs celebrity effects to attract a more internationalised audience and coordinate the official ‘cultural stepping-out’ strategy.

### 4.3 Narrating the benevolent ‘music arena’ in *I Am a Singer*

As a reality talent show, *I Am a Singer* interweaves performance with the structure of a melodramatic documentary. The show builds a documentary-like melodramatic narrative to extend the time-space boundary of the musical competition. Admittedly, the main body of the show involves the singing performances of contestants, but the show looks like a documentary embedded with musical competition. Every episode begins with a 20-minute pre-competition highlight with rehearsals and other preparations, and ends with backstage voting and an announcement of the results. The processes and intervals of singing performances are cross-clipped with the reactions of live audience and other singers, in addition to backstage conversations between singers and musical critics’ comments. The time structure in the show is significantly compressed. A 90 to 120-minute episode usually covers the past, present and future of the competition event from the arrivals of singers every week to their outlook for the competition of the following week. The result is that the story of each episode unfolds in a variety of scenes with differently designed functions in the documentary-style narrative as follows:

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Michael Wong (S5), are Malaysian Chinese.
1. Every contestant rides a sponsored car from the airport to the main studio.
2. Every singer receives a greenroom where he or she can make up, relax, chat to the musical broker and/or others, and watch the others’ performances before going up on the stage.
3. A singer may walk to the backstage accompanied by his or her musical broker through a corridor and an elevator.
4. A singer performs in the main studio for the live audience.
5. Commentators may give a few brief comments in a monitor room after a performance.
6. All singers who have completed their performances and their musical brokers sit in a saloon and watch the rest of the performances.
7. 500 live audience members vote in a hall and staff members count votes in a room under the supervision of commentators and the chief director.
8. The chief director announces the ranking results to all singers and their musical brokers in a simply decorated studio.
9. Singers may share their feedback about performances and give an outlook on the next episode in unknown studios.

The melodramatic and detailed representations of singers, live audiences, musical brokers and commentators captured in the multiple time and space scenes hinge on the strictness and manoeuvrability of the production procedure. I Am a Singer has a screenwriting team in which a chief screenwriter leads a group of assistant screenwriters (Y. Yang & Tian, 2013, p. 16). Every assistant screenwriter takes charge of interacting with one of the contestants to write a script for shooting the show. The scripts do not serve the characters appearing in the show, but rather the cameramen must anticipate anything crucial to the plot. Taking the first episode of the first season as an example, 47 cameras took over 1000 minutes of video material in total (Y. Yang & Tian, 2013, p. 20). Excepting the finals that adopt the live broadcasting mode, the other episodes are skilfully edited to portray the ups and downs of the narrative. They do this through rich video shots in multiple time and space scenes, in addition to the alluring competition mechanisms of the show itself. The shot-and-edited production experience with detailed pre-arranging programming plans lays a solid foundation for the live broadcasts of the finals. By the technical use of the satellite news gathering van, the final episodes of the past seasons with a densely compacted narrative structure have been nearly up to the exquisite broadcasting level of previous edited episodes (Y. Yang & Tian, 2013, p. 21).
The show, from singing performance to melodramatic documentary, is structured around its core idea: a competition between professional talented singers. There are two main selling points of *I Am a Singer* in connection with the attribute of competition as the key element of talent shows. The first is the competition as the main clue to the documentary narrative and the second is the competition as a format that places exquisite singing performances together. First, as the competition is the main target of the documentary narrative, the show effectively deploys a chain of suspense with detailed plots from beginning to end. They ask questions like: which singing stars would like to participate in the competition? What songs would contestants sing on the scene? What is the rank of every episode? How do contestants react to the result? Who would be eliminated? Who would come to challenge the remaining singers? Who becomes champion? The show subsequently links together such attractive plots to form a series of melodramatic narrative climaxes, thereby extending and maximising the entertaining effects. For example, when the beginning of the first season shows the seven singers arriving at the studio one at a time, the suspense about the cast is candidly revealed. The production team then calls them to stay in their own greenrooms and prevents them from meeting each other until entering the salon after their on-stage performances. The plot design gives the cameramen the chance to capture their first responses to the revelations of their competitors in the show. As a result, the narrative logic does not simply broadcast the competition itself but rather it melodramatises the story of the competition in the format of talent shows.

To perform classic songs is another significant factor in appealing to the audience. According to the rules of the show, all singers can sing their own representative work once, but for the rest of the performances they must choose classic works. The concept of classic works mainly refers to those songs that could withstand the test of time and the market. While it is uncertain for the production team as to whether the audience would recognise a new original song, this strategy for selecting classic songs is a safe method for cultivating its popularity of the show and creating a strong nostalgic atmosphere for the live and home audiences. As it is, the competition is a format organising a series of
euphonic singing performances in a line. In early Chinese talent shows, singing out of tune or in funny ways represented grassroots culture and a means of attracting the audience. In contrast, \textit{I Am a Singer} is aimed at pursuing perfect audio-visual enjoyment. This ambitious goal is closely related to technical support. As an old Chinese saying goes, ‘The worker, who wishes to do his work well, must first sharpen his or her tool’\footnote{See \textit{The Analects of Confucius}: 15:10, \url{http://wengu.tartarie.com/wg/wengu.php?no=401&l=lunyu} (last accessed 17 April 2019).} \textit{I Am a Singer} is deliberately equipped with top-level audio facilities and a full acoustic orchestra (Sina, 2013a). Meanwhile, the production team has also invited many famous musicians to take part in the show. For example, Kubert Leung, a Hong Kong musician widely recognised as one of the most outstanding musical producers in the Chinese-language popular music arena, serves as the show’s music director. In other words, technical music proficiency and reputation form a solid foundation for the show as one that focuses largely on professionalism. Many contestants expressed that they are honoured to perform in such well-equipped and prestigious facilities and teams (Sina, 2013a). Due to such professional technical support, performers never give live renditions with simple ready-made accompaniments. Many covers are excellent derivative works far beyond the level of simple imitation. For instance, Lin Chih-Hsuan covered Jay Chou's \textit{Fade Away (Yanhua yileng)} in the third episode of the first season. Using a distinct high-pitched tone, Lin’s cover subtly adds an erhu live accompaniment in the interlude. The modelling and effects of stage lights vary with the changes of the melody to create an atmosphere of audio-visual aestheticism. The concentrated display of exquisite singing performances provides strong dialogue and conveys appreciation.

In the professional talent show, there is a one-dimensional moral order to which contestants and other characters must adhere. The music arena is articulated in benevolent Confucianism, a practice of social ethics wherein people go about devoting themselves to their careers and practice love and compassion for each other. \textit{I Am a Singer} constructs an imagined well-off music arena where
singers emotionally sing to resonate with audiences, rather than a vanity fair where pop stars or idols sing in the pursuit of fame and money. As shown in the process of all singing performances, contestants undertake the task of announcing all items on the stage in most episodes except for some breakout rounds and all final rounds. This deliberate design implies that singers must narrate their own stories to the audience with sincere attitudes, echoing the program’s name I Am a Singer, which stresses the subjectivity of singers as a profession that differs from stars or idols that are essentially packaged and sold by the entertainment industry. While the older, middle-aged and young talented singers appear in the show together and sing well-known songs, the show also engages in a storytelling series of musical careers, feelings and dreams. These stories piece together an ideal outline of the ‘Chinese-language pop music arena’ elaborated explicitly through verbal communication of all characters and implicitly through their musical practice. In this sense, as the stereotyping tendency of competing singers in the show weakens their individuality, the compelling positive spectacle reacts to not only the current cultural-political atmosphere but also to the media’s own market needs.

The show’s contestants present their pursuit of exquisite professionalism. It manifests a sort of ‘genuine [attitude] towards music’, as the chief director Hong Tao put it (Sina, 2013b). I call the formulaic narrative ‘staying true to the original aspiration’ (buwang chuxin), which is also a political motto frequently used along with the ‘China Dream’. In 2016, President Xi Jinping first used the term to emphasise the founding mission of the party at a rally celebrating the CPC’s 95th founding anniversary.\footnote{See Xi’s speech at the rally marking the 95th founding anniversary of the CPC: \url{http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-07/01/c_1119150660.htm} (last accessed 17 April 2019).} ‘The original aspiration’ implies political correctness with a paradoxical attitude towards the market. On the one hand, marketisation seems to have stained or threatened pure communist aspirations, while on the other, a well-off society outlined by the party must be measurable by real affluence of its people. Although the first four seasons broadcast earlier than Xi’s speech, the inspiring story of the music arena in I Am a Singer coincides with the official
narrative of ‘staying true to the original aspiration’. The nature of the show is a lucrative cultural product of HNSTV within the profit-driven market mechanism, and it is aimed at representing the sublimation and purification of the ‘music arena’ on the level of ideological values by eroding the arena and the singers’ commercialised meanings. In this regard, the show implicitly indoctrinates the society with the party-ordained moral order that the professional community explicitly represents and promotes in context.

In the official trailer of the first season, contestants are asked by the production team: ‘What is a singer?’49 The trailer briefly summarises an answer: ‘real music, true strength and genuine emotion’ (zhen yinyue, zhen shili, and zhen ganqing). These positive values of professionalism are dissociated from a series of negative impressions saturating the highly commercialised entertainment circle, such as ‘lip-syncing’, ‘over-packaged stars’, ‘idols putting on airs’, ‘scandal hype’, etc. In contrast, the narrative of exquisite professionalism is structured around the following four multi-layered aspects: professional capability, singing sentiments, devotion, and behaviours.

First, the narrative imagines exquisite professionalism among singers to indicate they ought to have ‘singing ability’ (changgong). If a singer is not much better than average, it does not fit within the parameters of the show as oriented toward professionalism. In other words, there would be little sense in portraying an unpersuasive representation of exquisite professionalism, if it had been only limited to a sort of pursuit. While many past singing talent shows were full of below-bar singing, I Am a Singer declares the importance of singing ability, prioritising showing high-level competition among singers. The element of musical euphony is not only a selling point but also a basic point of the narrative about what it means to be a singer.

49 See the official trailer: https://www.mgtv.com/b/10215/3238111.html (last accessed 17 April 2019).
Moreover, this sort of superb artistry in the show is often involved in a series of melodramatic stories or atmospheres. Singing is not merely a demonstration of personal professional capability, but also a means of expressing inner feelings that resonate with the audience. This philosophy contains professional ethics that are difficult to morally challenge: a singer is eventually supposed to sing for the audience with sentiment and human emotion, rather than experts or money. Hence, *I Am a Singer* is accustomed to placing the singing performances within the documentary-style narrative structure to contextualise lyrics and the corresponding musical atmospheres among the personal stories of singers. It also tends to pay tribute to someone or something, or consider their responses to public issues. Singing intentions are perceivable in the short interviews of singers and commentators. For example, Huang Qishan in the first season and Tengger in the sixth season covered versions of Liu Huan’s *Can’t Leave You* (*li bu kai ni*). Huang’s version is mainly contextualised in her personal attitude surrounding her music career. As shown in a brief interview cut before her singing, she says, ‘My attitude towards music presents in the lyrics, “Love and hate, all controlled by you.” I would like to say to music, “But today, I can no longer leave you, whether you love me or not.”’ After her performance, the presenter says: ‘Whether or not you know the female singer Huang Qishan before this [performance], I hope you will keep a small place for her in your mind, because she can give you the strength.’ While the close-up in this scene shows her face covered with tears, Huang’s singing has not only been a means of livelihood but also a commitment to music itself, as well as to her career and her audience. In contrast, Tengger’s cover mainly narrates his nostalgia for the bygone days in his hometown. In the short video, he shares some old pictures to visualise the reminiscence of his harsh but happy and gratified past with his family. As echoed in *Can’t Leave You*, he deeply cherished the kinship between brothers and sisters, but especially as older generations of their family passed away. While the discursive strategy endows song with new meanings connected to what singers want to express to the audience, being an outstanding singer means being not only technically proficient, but also the appearance of sincerity.
The emotional reactions of live audiences to performances captured in the pictures are another representation of singing sentiments. The live audience is constructed as some philharmonic amateurs appreciating talented singers and excellent music, rather than a mass of often cult-like populist fans as shown in Super Girl Voice. The close-up shots edited into the process of on-stage performances show the exaggerated facial expressions of the live audience. One example is Han Lei’s section in the first episode of the second season, where there are altogether 24 shots of the live audience during his 4 minutes and 30 seconds of performance. Some of the audience whisper along with the melody; some swing their arms; some give a standing ovation at the end. In some cases, the show exhibits the audience with tears on their faces. These emotional and extroverted reactions are strongly at odds with the implicative and introverted stereotype of a Chinese audience. However, from another perspective, specifically if the show did not actually screen these reactions, it would not be persuasive that the performances are touching and moving. Therefore, representing the live audience reacting onscreen is an integral part of narrating the singing sentiments of singers.

The third aspect of exquisite professionalism is narrated around the professional dedication of singers that embodies their commitments to their music careers. The show is conditioned to present persistent striving for artistic perfection through sharing their views about minor details with the music producer and instrumental performers and then rehearsing many times to perform excellently. One alternative manifestation of their professional dedication is a storytelling strategy of making the singers insist on participating in the show and performing for the audience despite minor illnesses. For example, in the first episode of the first season, Chen Ming takes an intravenous drip in her greenroom before her performance. The show specifically incorporates close-up scenes where she asks a doctor to give the injection in her left hand to avoid affecting the right hand she uses to hold the microphone while onstage. The first episode of the third season also employs similar forms of expression to depict a positive image of Han Hong’s persistence with physical discomfort. It is evident that these narrative expanding the audiences’ understanding from on-stage glamour to backstage hardship. Although the plot sometimes develops to be an excuse for their poor
performances at the end of the match, it is more inspiring if their musical successes seem hard-earned and a result of self-dedication and self-sacrifice.

In addition, all contestants appear to appreciate each other verbally and non-verbally, which is at odds with the stereotype of the music arena where some pop stars are unfriendly with one as a result of commercial competitive relationships, and certainly different than the idol package of self-conceited bravado. All singers in serious competition on the show construct harmonious interpersonal relationships onscreen. As their easy-going and amicable manners strip them of their pop star halos, the show articulates them as a group of singers with similar professional pursuits. This purifies their common profession and even the music arena, shifting the public away from imagining the profitable commercialised vanity fair so common to pop icons. While it exists in the competition format, the professional talent show is not tense or suspenseful in terms of onscreen relationships. Thus, the show repeats some plot patterns. Before and after their performances, singers bow to humbly pay their respects to live audiences and the orchestra. During the performance of some singers, it is often shown in the close-up pictures that other singers listen seriously and carefully and express their admiration when skill is apparent. When some relatively young singer shows his or her respect to some senior singer, the latter also returns a compliment or words of encouragement. When some singer is eliminated from the competition, other singers emotionally and reluctantly part. As the show deploys themes like this widely in each episode, *I Am a Singer* has somewhat homogenised the images of singers within a benevolent moral universe.

*I Am a Singer* incorporates multi-layered narratives of exquisite professionalism into the media representation of the benevolent music arena. While the old, middle-aged and young representative singers project the collective image of professional devotion with genuine attitude, the music arena located at the moral high ground in accordance with the party-state cultural-moral order creates a tone of artistic professionalism closely connected with cultural elites. This is essentially different from the grassroots complex of *Super Girl Voice* with the characteristics of amateur participation and popular voting. As the
entertainment discourse of exquisite professionalism has replaced the grassroots cultural representations of the uncontrolled and rebellious ‘super girls’, the market attractiveness of the professional talent show has become mainly based on reconfiguring the competition format of the talent show genre and celebrity charm. In that sense, the talent show genre has regained its position in the socio-cultural life of Chinese people because it sits outside the established model of Super Girl Voice: the unconstrained media market indefinitely stimulated and induced a sort of carnival entertainment. In contrast, the entertainment created by I Am a Singer has been pretentiously labelled ‘professional’, ‘elegant’, ‘exquisite’, and ‘high-quality’ in the name of ‘real music, true strength and genuine emotion’. It satisfies the party-state’s hope for the music arena, and more accurately its media representation because the celebrities give a party-ordained ethics demonstration to the general populace. Moreover, as it features a set of famous singers from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan and centres on Chinese-language popular songs, the widespread popularity of I Am a Singer on the mainland and in Gang-Tai is another political correction: China’s talent shows and even entertainment television programmes have gradually started becoming ‘cultural stepping-out’ tools.

4.4 ‘The repetition of music’ in talent shows

Since the mid-2000s, the development of Chinese popular music has been closely associated with the talent show genre. On the one hand, despite the multiplicity of its subgenres, China’s talent shows have always placed particular emphasis on singing popular songs as the most significant performance art. On the other hand, singing talent shows mirror the understanding of the recent situation of China’s music industry in the context of the weakness of record sales from the popularity of pirated and smuggled copies in the 1980s and 1990s to free online music downloads in the 2000s. More concretely, the combination of the talent show genre and music is a result of exploiting new musical market opportunities on the premise of the halfway transition from socialism to the market economy. Jacques Attali (1985) suggests that music evolves parallel to social structures as an aesthetic form, as well as that music is ‘a herald of times to come’ (p. 4). As he
notes, ‘Its styles and economic organisation are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code’ (Attali, 1985, p. 11). Therefore, the development of a close relationship between talent shows and music over the past decade has heralded the reconfiguration of the cultural-political structure.

Attali (1985) divides the history of music within society into four stages: ‘sacrifice’, ‘representation’, ‘repetition’ and ‘composition’ (pp. 18-20). The way in which music is thought, produced, played and distributed in a given social period engenders each stage. Indeed, music is related to the power of the strong over the weak. Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, music entered the stage of ‘repetition’ with the development of sound recording technologies, prompting the emergence of the music industry (Attali, 1985, pp. 87-88). The production of music as a sort of mediated commodity has deeply engaged with the capitalist mechanism from consumption-oriented production to homogeneous aesthetics. While people can consume music records repeatedly, capitalism has dissolved the differences between music over the course of time.

The music mediated in reality talent shows is a relatively new product within the capitalist order. After all, singing talent shows seek survival in the highly commercialised media system, so the fusion of music and talent shows manifests the close relationship between the media and music industries. The production and distribution of singing talent shows indicate the audio-visual and melodramatic repetitions of music. First, the industry cooperation or convergence between television and music extends the repetition of music in the recording industry from only audio to audio-visual levels. Television is a medium of recording and visualising music so as to increase the consumption value of music. The audio-visual repetition of music is more complete preservation of ‘representation’ because it adequately reflects how music is not only a sound art, but also a performing art. As it were, the products that television media sell are not only recorded sound, but also a series of visual symbols related to them. Second, from Super Girl Voice to I Am a Singer, the talent show genre has been characterised by a variety of widely-perceived competition formats that visualise
and melodramatise music. That is why I call the process ‘a melodramatic repetition of music’. The talent show genre has endowed music with a more productive symbolic system. As Hong Tao says at the end of the second episode of the third season: ‘Music should have not been used for competition, but when there is a game, the audience will pay more attention to music.’ His words inadvertently uncover the essence of singing talent shows: there is higher consumer value when music is structured visually and melodramatically.

The repetition of music in talent shows especially reflects the overwhelming proportion of cover songs in singing talent shows as I have mentioned. This means that singing talent shows involve extending repetition of music in the established record industry. While the audience’s concentration on cover songs in talent shows transfers to the profits of television media in the form of advertising revenues, such repetition neglects the position of original music and the diversity of music styles. Such shows may not contribute to the development of music itself because the repetition consolidates the content and form of classic works produced by the music arena.

As represented by Super Girl Voice, amateur talent shows produced a crisis derived from repetition because the absence of veteran singers did not maximise the economic benefits of the music arena. Because amateur talent shows have traditionally accumulated capital through exploiting the low labour costs of amateur participators, the popular and lucrative genre has marginalised the position of cultural elites. While amateur talent shows have been accused of cultural vulgarity, the party-state also needs cultural celebrities to effectively and widely demonstrate the party-ordained moral order. To continuously use the genre profitably, media institutions must compromise with the party-state and cultural elites. Against this background, it was inevitable that the talent show genre would gradually cast off the label of grassroots as represented by the rise of professional singing talent shows.
The radical transformation from amateur to professional talent shows has reconfigured the audio-visual and melodramatic repetition of music therein according to the restructuring of power relations in the Chinese context. While the current market economy promotes socio-cultural diversity, the ideological state apparatus has restored the market order of talent shows by employing a series of cultural-moral governing technologies, as I have analysed in Chapter 2. The emerging power landscape involves collusion between the party-state, highly-commercialised media, and professional singers. As the state-controlled commercialised media is subject to the party-state cultural hegemony, reintegrating a collaborative model between the media and music industries has heralded the regression of professional singers. To some extent, the emergence and popularity of professional talent shows implies that party-state authoritarians and the cultural elites maintain vigilance against pluralistic and diverse cultures in China’s postsocialist era. If *Super Girl Voice* presents a screening process for entrance into the music arena, the audio-visual and melodramatic repetition of the benevolent music arena in *I Am a Singer* is narrated as how the music arena is supposed to be.

Based on the state-controlled market order, *I Am a Singer* is stuck with a new dilemma of homogenous aesthetics; repetition of exquisite professionalism silences other possible music in terms of audio-visual and melodramatic aspects. First, the professional talent show is implicitly designed as a contest in which a group of experienced and talented singers control their voices precisely, often reaching a very high-pitch. The nature of the so-called ‘singing ability’ is a sort of repetition labelled with professional skill apart from amateur singing performances or behaviours. It is in the name of professionalism that music loses freedom of expression as its evaluation standard is technically normalised as the quality, accuracy and height of singing voices. To some extent, the complicated connection between music and human beings is simplified for the singers as a profession, rather than simply practising it as a discipline. With the repetition of voice in terms of evaluation orientation, this sort of ability for producing voice is deemed as a means of survivability in the music arena, and later as a form of competitiveness in the show. By building an impassable cultural wall between
amateurs and professionals, any off-key singing is unacceptable and any singing performance that is not deemed technically difficult is regarded as weak. As the concept of exquisite professionalism reinforces the harsh demand for vocal skill, the broadcast version of *I Am a Singer* tunes original voices to reach an almost perfect audio effect. This means that almost all defects of contestant voices are concealed in post-production. For example, it was controversial that Kit Chan, a Singaporean singer, was eliminated in the second episode of the third season, and many TV viewers were puzzled. Chen’s live singing performance was officially unsatisfactory because she was out-of-tune (People, 2015). This example spurs one to reflect on an issue: the repetition of mediated music is at odds with the representation of music heard live in a place where real musicians perform. Music mediated through recording (including on television) experiences screening. In Chen’s case, viewers could hear a perfect voice as a result of tripartite collusion between the party-state, media and professional singers. When viewers are repeatedly immersed in flawless voices like Chen’s onscreen performance after editing, a kind of value judgement on music becomes the norm. This normalisation produces intense expectations of audiences, who have lost their ability to recognise the diverse facets of music itself and the value embedded in imperfection. Because these productions deprive the public of reflecting on music, the mass carnival as represented in *Super Girl Voice* is continuously diminishing in a rewritten cultural-political landscape. Ultimately, the talent show genre is taken for granted as a game for the strong and already successful, rather than a platform for the masses (and for rising to success) as its creators originally intended.

Furthermore, while *I Am a Singer* narrates the benevolent music arena in the repetition of music, what the audience repeatedly consumes is actually not so much music but rather the here-and-now melodramatic music performed by given singers. In fact, the music recording industry has always packaged musicians as products for the sake of marketability. While *Super Girl Voice* worked to convey transformations of raw talent to polished singers, *I Am a Singer* is a benevolent theatre where the character settings of celebrity singers are pre-packaged and easily consumable. The melodramatic repetition of music avoids any possibility
of politicising music (Z. Zhou, 2013). Furthermore, the narrative combination of purifying music and morally uplifting singers as a profession shields the talent show genre against accusations of cultural vulgarity. *I Am a Singer* indicates that market value is unnecessarily connected with vulgar tastes, so it is not supposed to be regarded as the enemy of professional talent shows. Rather, the show attempts to reconstruct the market order embedded in the talent show genre to centre on cultural elites rather than on grassroots facets. The benevolent moral universe implies that the degree of market recognition is an important criterion for the successes of their music careers. When it comes to competition within a professional talent show, the market order is closely bound up with the celebrity halos of professional singers. Despite always hailing music as a central agenda of the competition, *I Am a Singer* is actually a game of ranking in order of seniority; the benevolent competitive atmosphere is only limited to media representation. While different groups of audiences have emotional connections with their favourite singers in different ways, the melodramatic repetition of music can contribute to alternative cultural interpretations in other contexts.

### 4.5 Alternative ways of watching *I Am a Singer* in Taiwan

The first season of *I Am a Singer*, the popular professional talent show made in China, caused a sensation in Taiwan. Taiwan’s media widely reported on the professional talent before the grand finale because many Taiwanese singers appeared on the show. Of the seven singers who made it to compete in the grand finale, four came from Taiwan. Even if Taiwan’s television media did not broadcast the show at that time, Taiwanese audiences could watch it through video streaming websites such as YouTube on smartphones, tablets and computers, allowing them to keep track of the latest news on Taiwanese singers competing in China (D. Chen, 2013). On 12th April 2013, three 24/7 news channels in Taiwan, including ETTV News, CTi News and TVBS-News, cut their evening news reports to air the grand finale of the show in the form of breaking news, and without the authorisation of HNSTV. Among them, ETTV News even aired the whole live event from 7:58 p.m. to 12:22 a.m. the next day, notwithstanding broadcasting a few pieces of other news.
Owing to the previous long-term and unidirectional flow of popular culture from Gang-Tai to China in the Chinese linguistic-cultural market, the popularity of *I Am a Singer* in Taiwan was a landmark cultural event. After all, never before has an entertainment television programme made in China been as popular as *I Am a Singer* in Taiwan. As HNSTV celebrates expansion to overseas markets, the export potential of television entertainment serves the ‘cultural stepping-out’ strategy of the party-state. This strategy is meant to contest cultural hegemony beyond the jurisdictional scope of the CPC’s regime itself. *I Am a Singer*’s significant success implies that its brand and narrative embody the official idea of ‘telling China’s story properly’, which is a saying that President Xi Jinping has frequently used to summarise the goal of external propaganda since 2013 (CCDI, 2017). By featuring the cast from liang’an sandi and beyond in the story of the benevolent music arena, *I Am a Singer* packages music repetition with exquisite professionalism for the party-ordained moral universe where professional singers are represented. However, the questions I ask here are: How does one in Taiwan consider the sensational effects of *I Am a Singer*? Would Taiwanese viewers make sense of the benevolent narrative of the music arena? Why is the show unable to effectively create a benevolent atmosphere between mainland China and Taiwan, instead heightening the tension and even exposing the former’s ulterior motives?

To answer these questions combined with the cultural-political context of Taiwan, I take a brief detour to review the controversial problem of complicated national identities and their influence on mass media in Taiwan. Taiwan is a culturally Chinese society (*huaren shehui*) but politically split, featuring two coalitions: pan-blue and pan-green. Their names are respectively based on the symbolic colours of the two major parties: the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). While the pan-green backers advocate Taiwanisation (or de-sinicisation) and Taiwan independence, the pan-blue camp is more inclined to retaining Chinese nationalist identity and maintaining economic and cultural linkages with mainland China (Fell, 2005). According to a survey by the NCCU-ESC, the number of respondents who identified as ‘Taiwanese’ reached 57.1 percent in 2013, whereas the percentage expressing the dual identity
of ‘Taiwanese and Chinese’ was 35.9 percent, and only 3.0 percent defined themselves as ‘Chinese’. This kind of political polarisation is different from the conventional left-right political spectrum based on attitudes toward economic and social questions, making it difficult to classify either coalition as politically ‘left’ or ‘right’ (IBP, 2013, p. 176). Likewise, this means that the core political issue across the island remains the reunification–independence question (tongdu yiti), which is widely considered the most ‘divisive issue in Taiwan’s politics’ (Hsieh & Niou, 1996, p. 222). This point is the prerequisite of comprehending and interpreting the cultural-political rhetoric and conflicts of media discourse in Taiwan.

Since martial law was lifted in 1987, Taiwan entered an era of media liberalisation. The government has not monopolised media resources, yet the media have kept their own strong political tendencies along the blue-green political lines rather than conforming to conventional left-right politics. There are eleven Taiwan-based news channels that are respectively divided into pro-blue and pro-green media according to their political tendencies. Except for news reports, one of the most significant features of Taiwan’s news channels is the highly intensive broadcasting of political talk shows with one-sided political interests. Political talk shows are an extension of ‘the political struggles between the blue and the green camps’ (lanlü e’dou). In these shows, many politicians and professional television commentators debate current political issues. After the grand finale of I Am a Singer in 2013, more than a dozen political talk shows in Taiwan discussed the popularity of the show from various angles. It was inevitable that the panellists exposed their own distinct political tendencies when they commented on the cultural event. In addition, Taiwanese political talk shows often quote the reports of the four major newspapers (sidabao), including China Times (Zhongguo shibao), United Daily News (Lianhe bao), Liberty Times (Ziyou shibao), and Apple Daily (Pingguo ribao). Interestingly, in spite of the dramatic

decline in newspaper circulation in Taiwan over the years, newspapers still play a crucial role in the direction of public opinion.

My research object in this section involves Taiwanese intellectual discourses wherein politicians, television political commentators, and scholars discussed the sensational popularity of *I Am a Singer* in 2013 in Taiwan. My analysis is mainly based on three representative political talk shows as shown in Appendix 4 alongside related television interviews with political figures, highly cited newspaper comments, and academic articles. Admittedly, the discourses I collected are not representative of Taiwan’s general population. It is nevertheless worthwhile to analyse the discourses as they fully disclose the ways in which contending national identities in Taiwan shape intellectual perceptions. This is especially the case regarding the influx of the made-in-China talent show, as well as the increasing influence of its popular culture.

Collective intellectual reflections are widely but implicitly contextualised in the neoliberal political economy beyond the border, as China has increasingly dominated the networked transnational order of the Chinese cultural-linguistic market. The controversy is a struggle of two different neoliberal routes for Taiwan’s development: ‘through China to the world’ and ‘through the world to China’, which are respectively backed by the pan-blue and pan-green coalitions. Faced with a huge difference in the scale of their markets, Taiwanese intellectuals are culturally anxious about ‘neoliberalism through China’ – a KMT policy view that says Taiwan should take advantage of the rise of China to join the world economic order (F.-c. I. Yang, 2016, p. 99).

Many intellectuals have realised the vulnerable situation of Taiwan’s media industry by probing into the sensation of *I Am a Singer* in Taiwan. In the neoliberal order of the cultural-linguistic market, a large amount of capital has actively flowed into China’s media market. Lo Shu-Le suggests that the enthusiasm for the media market of China is based on market scale. After all, the total population of China is around fifty-six times that of Taiwan. The great disparity of the population sizes determines their different market-driven media
industry structures. The result is that many comments from television personalities in Taiwan marvel at the high production cost and profit of China’s entertainment programmes. While the production cost of the first season was a whopping NT 300 million dollars (≈10 million US dollars), the advertising revenue of the first season amounted to about NT 720 million dollars. The grand finale alone generated NT 240 million dollars in advertising revenue. In contrast, according to Huang Kuang-chin, the largest ever production cost of a single episode of Taiwan’s entertainment programme was NT 900 thousand dollars. Chen Yung-Kang, as an insider of Taiwan’s media industry, pointed out that this has been a very high price in Taiwan. The comparison of production costs implies ambivalence towards capital. On the one side, many media firms in Taiwan have gotten used to the reality of low production costs and regarded this as normal, but this reality plagues the development of Taiwan’s media industry. These same firms are inclined to belittle what I Am a Singer has achieved. This has been an unenviable result of capital accumulation.

Owing to the power of capital and market, more of Taiwan’s media and artistic talent have considered China the centre of their career development. As China’s media market can provide these singers with more competitive opportunities and income than Taiwan, the logic of neoliberalism promotes a flow of talent towards China. Not only did HNSTV spend a big budget on inviting famous singers, but the stars also gained extra value after taking part in the show. Liau Ying-ting compares the appearance prices of four of Taiwan’s renowned singers who entered the grand finale before and after taking part in the competition. Mai Jo-yu argues that four Taiwanese contestants literally all win in the finale because they each took full advantage of the competition for their own career developments. In his opinion, Aska Yang was very happy to participate in the show because he was about to release his new album; Terry Lin would receive more invitations to commercial performances in the mainland; Julia Peng and Winnie Hsin increased their own visibility in the mainland market. With the influx of Taiwan’s artistic talent into China, made-in-China television programmes have increasingly been competitive in the Chinese cultural-linguistic market. It is becoming increasingly difficult for Taiwan’s audiences to see
Taiwanese stars in Taiwan’s own entertainment programs. In other words, the competitive capital-driven power of China’s entertainment programs has transformed the shared advantage of the Chinese linguistic-cultural market into a mechanism that more and more Taiwan’s audiences have been intended to watch the mainland’s television entertainment than ever before. This is specifically in accordance with the logic of neoliberalism and markets.

Due to the losses of talent and money during the process of neoliberalism through China, many intellectuals are anxious about the crisis of media and cultural creativity of which Taiwan has long been proud. Lung Ying-Tai, then Cultural Minister of Taiwan, proposed: ‘Thirty years later, will Taiwan still have innovative advantage? This is a problem we must seriously face’ (LTN, 2013). Because of the advantage of production cost, China’s media have become accustomed to purchasing successful franchises from other countries. The format of *I Am a Singer* originated in South Korea. For investors, it is a profitable business for investing a large amount of capital in a successful franchise because those formats that have achieved success internationally provide promising expectations for audience ratings of Chinese versions. As Chou Yu-kou points out, ‘It purchased not only the copyright but all production experience. Do Taiwan’s media have this kind of spirit? We only copy!’ The new production model and ideas for television programs in China are of world-class quality. In contrast, many of Taiwan’s media production companies have been still copying formats of other countries because of the dual pressures of small production budgets and audience ratings.

According to the different political standpoints and degrees of cultural intimacy in China, their common cultural anxiety has spawned two main rationales for the rise of China’s media industry and the influx of cultural products made in China. The Taiwanese pro-unification media China Times thinks,

The mainland has abundant funds and [a] huge market. Taiwan’s ideas are good, but the market is small with less money. Nowadays, when Hollywood has even fought for the mainland market, Taiwan’s
entertainment industry would decline if it is blocked within the island alone and attached to the label of ‘bad-mouthing Taiwan’.

大陆钱多、市场大，台湾创意好，却钱少市场小，如今连好莱坞都要抢食大陆市场，若动辄冠上「唱衰台湾」的帽子，台湾的娱乐事业锁在岛内，不唱也衰了！(ChinaTimes, 2013)

The market-oriented view takes a positive attitude towards neoliberal ideas through China by placing stress on the complementary nature of the two markets. Integration into China’s gigantic market is a shortcut to promoting Taiwan’s media industry. In contrast, the pro-independence commentator Chung Nien-huang suggests that Taiwan should not embrace China’s market exclusively, but instead learn from the success of K-pop so as to take aim at the whole world. He contends: ‘I found a detail. South Korean singers do not sing in Korean too much but often in English … Internationalisation should be a direction of Taiwanese cultural industry to reap profits rather than developing in China only.’ Chung’s view is conditioned by the subjectivity of Taiwan in strong opposition of ‘neoliberalism through China’. So-called ‘internationalisation’ is an alternative means of referring to ‘neoliberalism through the world’.

Taiwanese pro-green politicians and intellectuals not only express their hostility about cross-strait media convergence but also regard cultural products from China, as represented by I Am a Singer, as ‘fierce floods and savage beasts’ (hong shui meng shou) – simply put, they are negative. The paradox between increasingly consolidated Taiwanese national identity and the growing economic dependence of Taiwan on mainland China will eventually cause serious social upheaval within Taiwanese society (S. S. Lin, 2013). On 14th April 2013, Su Tseng-Chang, then-chairman of the DPP, accused the CPC’s current strategy as a means of ‘waging a war of reunification’ (tongzhan) on Taiwan by ‘penetrating into the island, into households, into our brains’ (rudao, ruhu, runao); in the same breath, he reminded Taiwanese people to raise their vigilance against Chinese cultural products when Taiwanese media ‘praised China and bad-mouthed Taiwan’ (zanmei Zhongguo, changshuai Taiwan). In his opinion, the neoliberal process of Taiwan’s media industry through China is not merely an economic problem because the structure impacts the direction of contending national identities. There
is similar cultural anxiety in Indonesia. Because the authorities are concerned that dubbing translation poses a threat to the national identity of Indonesian people to confuse themselves with others, the government forbids dubbing for Western television programmes (Boellstorff, 2003, pp. 234-235). In contrast, there are no differences in appearances of Chinese and Taiwanese singers, so there are likewise no clear boundaries between sameness and otherness. Indeed, they have even shared a common historical and cultural memory of the ‘music arena’, so the doctrine of ‘neoliberal through China’ may accordingly lead to an identity crisis for the pro-independence coalition.

Despite holding different views towards the exchange and cooperation of cross-strait cultural industries, almost all Taiwanese intellectuals situated China (used by pro-independence Taiwanese) or mainland China (used by pro-unification Taiwanese) as the ‘Other’ of Taiwan. This was one way to interpret the competition results of the first season of *I Am a Singer*. They almost invariably expressed their objections to the results, wherein the rock duet Yu-Quan of China beat Taiwanese singer Lin Chih-Hsuan in the grand finale. In this sense, Su’s anxiety seemed non-apparent because it was politically correct that Taiwanese should support Taiwanese singers. Many comments are based on a conspiracy that the state-run HNSTV would never dub a Taiwanese singer the winner. They called it ‘the conspiracy of the communist party’ (*A Gong de yinmo*).

By examining another professional talent show, *Talented Singers* produced by JSTV and broadcast in Taiwan, Sun Jung-Kuang and Li Hsin-Ying (2014) expected the format of competition to lead to an unexpected confrontation between two communities: ‘Taiwanese’ and ‘Mainlanders’ (p. 18). While Taiwanese audiences are immersed in the ‘cross-strait battle’ of the show, they consciously or unconsciously see a group of Chinese who not fundamentally differ from them (p. 18). The multinational competitors and audiences transform professional talent shows into ‘Sinophone musical Olympic games’ in which singers represent not only themselves as artists but also their national identities. The result is that viewers are more inclined to focus on singers from their own countries or regions. In terms of *I Am a Singer*, the production team placed no
special emphasis on the differences between national and/or regional identities to create a rivalry atmosphere between mainland China and Taiwan. Even so, the party-state’s agenda on promoting cross-strait harmony and unification could not be effectively set through the representation of the benevolent music arena. This is because Taiwanese intellectuals interpreted it as a battle between cross-strait singers. While the state-owned HNSTV produced *I Am a Singer* in accordance with the party-ordained moral order, it failed to transfer the commercial success of this programme in Taiwan to the ideological recognition of the Greater China. Therefore, the cultural-moral governance beyond the jurisdictional scope of the CPC’s regime was exposed to the imbalance between ‘governing culture’ and ‘governing society through culture’.

### 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter uncovers two interwoven aspects of the radical transformation of the talent show genre in the context of the neoliberal collusion structure in which the party-state regulates media outlets and cultural professionals while also creating a profitable market environment. First, by featuring professional talented singers, the talent show genre expresses a clear trend of exquisite professionalism compared to the original grassroots themes of the genre. The emergence of professional talent shows implies a cultural process of purifying singers as a respectable profession in a morally uplifting way to generate the media representation of the benevolent music arena against the alleged cultural vulgarity of amateur talent shows. As a matter of fact, *I Am a Singer* deliberately employed the win-win lucrative model between the media and music industries by incorporating the star effect of professional singers into the appealing format of the talent show genre. The format of these professional talent shows cannot yet cast off the limitation of ‘the repetition of music’ that has resulted from capitalist media and the culture industry. Concretely, the show is glutted with the hysterical pursuit of an ever-higher-pitched voice, as well as the melodramatic narrative of transforming professional singers to stars.
The second fundamental change is that the Western-inspired genre in China has actively followed the official propaganda agenda by using exquisite professionalism. The emergence of professional talent shows is based on the history and transnational context of the Chinese cultural-linguistic market. With the huge scale of the mainland in the networked transnational order, the party-state has employed the logic of neoliberalism to transfer cultural-moral governance to occur by means of the market. The change from being the target of governance to the tool of governance provides the market with an opportunity to serve the party-state’s ‘cultural stepping-out’ strategy. *I Am a Singer* features contestants from *Liang’an Sandi* and beyond, but the narrative of the benevolent music arena not only formulates a positive image of the music arena as a professional community, but also plays an important role in assimilating the cultural elites within the party-ordained moral ideal. Nevertheless, the different cultural-political context in which overseas audience is located means there may be alternative ways of understanding and interpreting *I Am a Singer*. 
This chapter turns its attention to the intertextual derivative media products of talent shows. As there were close engagements between early talent shows, once regarded as ‘carnivals of mass culture’, and their audience members, it was common that some active consumers produced a large number of fan or anti-fan texts, including fictions and online parodies on the basis of the interactive features of digital technology (L. Yang, 2009b; L. Yang & Bao, 2012). The party-state cultural-moral governance has gradually propelled state-owned commercial media conglomerates to alter the attractive ways of the talent show genre. The result has been a turning away from the past strategy of ‘fan engagement’ to heavily emphasise the political ‘China Dream’ discourse and exquisite professionalism. Similarly, the ways in which talent shows are discussed, interpreted and spoofed especially on the internet have also shifted. Since the negation of democratic implications and grassroots spirit originally embedded in the genre, the majority of discursive consumers have begun watching the genre only, rather than directly and deeply poaching, satirising, spoofing, commenting on, or playing on them as actively as did their counterparts during the time of Super Girl Voice in the mid-2000s (Huang, 2014, p. 140). In comparison, some profitable media enterprises have been appropriating online spoof discourses that internet users have used to create a series of comedy works concerning recent specific talent shows and the genre.

This transformation implies not only a cultural invasion of ‘cultural citizenship’ due to the collusion between the party-state ideology apparatus and neoliberal media industry, but also an extension of cultural practices from ‘tactics’ to ‘strategies’ as Michel de Certeau (1984) put it. In her study of online discussions about Super Girl Voice, Jingsi Wu (2012) investigates online public discourses surrounding the show from the perspective of ‘cultural citizenship’ at the intersection of television and new media. She argues for the internet’s
democratic potential, particularly since non-political media practices in certain contexts implicitly and in detail cover clear political expressions and statements. She refers to the process as ‘civic engagement’. This kind of civic engagement is not limited to online discussions. Rather, one of the most representative and widely studied ways of online political satire is e’gao, a Chinese term referring to online parody (Gong & Yang, 2010; H. Li, 2011; Meng, 2011; G. Yang & Jiang, 2015; Yu, 2015). For de Certeau (1984), a ‘strategy’ is a means of referring to the top-down calculation of power relationships that a subject (such as an army, a city, a business, a school and so on) conducts to control its object. A ‘tactic’ is characterised by ‘mobility’ and ‘a guileful ruse’ – a bottom-up calculated action of reliance on ‘opportunities’ at any given moment due to the absence of a proper locus (pp. 36-37). E’gao practised by internet users is a tactic of online cultural citizenship that is what de Certeau calls ‘an art of the weak’. This is because the practitioners are full of enthusiasm about consuming television entertainment products, such as talent shows, and producing related derivative online texts, images and videos. Oftentimes, this is a way of guilefully articulating their own political, social or public opinions by innuendo.

However, as the party-state’s cultural-moral governance has extended and gradually strengthened from television to the internet and as the commercialised growth of video streaming websites from capital investment to production levels has progressed, the practices of cultural citizenship on the basis of the internet have broken up into fragments. This is because of the inequalities in intentions between new media institutions, ordinary internet users and their ownership distribution in the context of state-controlled neoliberalism. On one side, the party-state has always attempted to control the growth of civil society, both online and offline, so as to go about maintaining the stability of the established political system and social structure. On the other side, new media enterprises aim to maximise revenues and profits by appropriating the discursive ways of ‘tactics’, as represented by e’gao. These are supposed to morph into top-down profitable ‘strategies’ to attract audiences’ attention. As the internet in China has been fading away from the Habermasian ideal of the ‘public sphere’, an emerging trend has been that the profit-driven media enterprises have colluded with the party-
state. Together, they form an overarching intent to deprive scattered individual internet users who are involved in the practices of online cultural citizenship. This is meant to occur in an approachable but implicitly authoritative way – that is a ‘brave new world’ depicted by Aldous Huxley.

This chapter uncovers the political-economic intentions of recent intertextual media products on talent shows, emphasising the neoliberal inequalities of ‘cultural citizenship’ in the Internet era. Moreover, this chapter analyses the nuanced ways in which profitable cultural practices appropriate e’gao as a marketing strategy, meanwhile curbing the fluid, diverse and complicated public voices surrounding the talent show genre and beyond. The first section projects insight into the reconfiguring process of the practices of online cultural citizenship, with a particular concentration on the extension of the e’gao practice from ‘tactic’ to ‘strategy’. While neoliberal calculations that online media enterprises make within the chain of cultural-moral governance have largely deconstructed the publicity of the internet, some have taken full advantage of e’gao discursive elements to create profitable media products. I examine three examples concerning media products spoofing talent shows: an episode of the web comedy series The Most Powerful King of the Talent Show, a sketch comedy named You Disturbed Me, and an episode of the web-comedy talk show Roast. Released before and after early 2014, respectively, the first two cases implicitly spoof The Voice of China, which was one of the most popular talent shows at that time. The third is a case created in 2018, in which several musicians who gained fame by taking part in talent shows as contestants or judges consume their own talent show experiences in the popular ‘roast’ format. In this format, participants poke fun at each other in a superficial way. The sketch comedy You Disturbed Me originally used the television gala format, and all three case studies are available on video streaming websites. Together, they demonstrate that the politically humorous and satirical discursive ‘tactics’ that should have belonged to the rabble or internet users are convertible into top-down ‘strategies’ under the joint influence of profitable media enterprises and party-state regulators. I then analyse how, in satirising talent shows, extending from internet users’ tactics to the profit-driven strategies of online media conglomerates can curb not only the public’s
voice, but also their opportunities and capabilities with regards to participating in social debates. Lastly, I conclude the chapter with a look at how the neoliberal market reinforces the party-state cultural-political structure rather than providing space for the diversification of social values.

5.1 Satirising talent shows: from ‘tactics’ to ‘strategies’

T. H. Marshall’s seminal research on ‘citizenship’ extensively conceptualised a series of subcategories, including civic, political and social rights, by investigating class differences in Western Europe (Marshall, 1950). His proposition is meant to balance the inequality of wealth distribution and social rights. Joke Hermes (2005) developed the cultural dimension of Marshall’s idealised citizenship, which can be referred to as ‘cultural citizenship’, by placing stress on the ‘less formal everyday practices of identity construction, representation, and ideology, and implicit moral obligations and right’ (p. 4). The concept of cultural citizenship oriented toward social equality is compatible with the Habermasian ideal of the ‘public sphere’. In this, citizens who participate in public discussions can discuss and negotiate with one another equally, openly, rationally and reciprocally (Habermas, 1984, 1989). During Super Girl Voice, there was a trans-media consumption process that accustomed active audience members to watching television talent shows and producing a large number of related online texts. The internet had implied democratic potential, making it an ideal channel or place where internet users could practice their online cultural citizenship. To express their political ideas through conventional political channels, Hermes (2005) suggests that media representations of ordinary people, their emotional and life experiences, are an alternative channel through which audiences reflect on daily life and public issues. As a consequence, audiences discuss and form implicit political expressions when they poach and spoof talent shows that originally had universally democratic implications and a grassroots complex. Their interpretations indicate relationships within the existing power structures.
While many scholars in the Frankfurt School contended that consumers as a passive group uncritically respond to media content that is determined by a hegemonic central authority (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979; Marcus, 1968), cultural theorists have reconfigured cultural consumption as a form of power, stressing the subjective initiative of audiences since the late 1980s (Fiske, 1989, 2011; Gray, 2005; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992). While taking active or passive degrees of media consumption behaviours into consideration, I suggest there are at least three levels of talent show audiences. The first group is composed of relatively ‘passive’ people who watch a talent show regularly or irregularly and may privately discuss the programme with others. Their economic contributions are limited to watching and perhaps being swayed by advertisements broadcasted during the show. The second group is composed of audiences who commit far more time and money to talent shows through more active consumption behaviours, such as sending paid text messages to vote for their favourite contestant, building fan groups for a certain programme or contestants from online to offline, purchasing branded products, and paying to download music or other performances that relate to the show. From the angle of production teams, this group of audience members are fans of talent shows or their contestants. The final and third group contains audiences who are unlimited regarding the buyer-seller relationship in their consumption behaviours and who exhibit what Michel de Certeau (1984) describes as ‘…production through consumption’ in the practices of everyday life, as well as ‘textual poachers’ (Jenkins, 1992). In short, their identities are a convergence of ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ (Toffler, 1981). With the development of mass customisation in the post-industrial age, original ‘pure’ consumers have gradually begun participating in the process of individual-use production. This kind of ‘prosuming’ activity has become particularly significant in the era of Web 2.0, when websites allow anyone to create user-generated content, such as blogs, microblogs, podcasts, online forums, chats, video-sharing sites, and the vast world of social media. Therefore, there is an intertextual engagement between the existing talent show and the derivative texts produced by the third stage of audience members who are enthusiastic about creating a large number of texts concerning talent shows, eschewing simply remaining viewers.
In particular, fan groups have become deeply involved in producing and distributing derivative texts regarding the talent show stars they adore and the genre itself. A case in point is *Yumi* (literally, ‘pieces of corn’), which is a term that refers to the fans of the winner Li Yuchun from *2005 Super Girl Voice*. Their active prosumption covers a wide range of activities, demonstrating that ways of reacting to the show encompass not only many conventional consumption behaviours, such as buying albums, attending concerts, organising birthday parties for Li Yuchun, setting up the Li Yuchun Fans Charity Fund (*yumi aixin jijin*) and so on. They also engaged in more traditional prosuming practices, such as publishing fan magazines, posting on internet forums, writing fan fiction, and so on (L. Yang, 2009b).

Other than admiring and supporting television talent shows and contestants, the creative motivations of prosumers vary with respect to their attitudes towards the talent shows they consume. As Jonathan Gray (2005) claims,

> Hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they [anti-fans] can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and ‘effects’ or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture. (p. 841)

In fact, these so-called online ‘anti-fans’ actively involved in producing texts through consumption by discussing, writing, or making derivative works about talent shows, aim to not only to parody or rail against the programmes themselves, but also to share and express their civic and political values through practising online cultural citizenship.

Jingsi Wu (2012) argues for the democratic potential of mass media, but in particular the internet, as online public discussions about *2009 Super Girl Voice* (with its Chinese name changing to *Happy Girl Voice*) centre on entertainment media experiences but also expressing more serious political values. Outside of online discussions, there are many other online methods in which Chinese talent show audience members appropriate elements of the genre and specific talent shows, such as segments, scenarios, formats or narratives, to make their own texts.
and express their political opinions. Guobin Yang and Min Jiang (2015) enumerate some common ways of online political satire as a networked practice by Chinese internet users, including parodies, jokes, slippery jingles (*shunkouliu*), verse, songs, flash videos, *e’gao*, jokes (*duanzi*), national sentence-making (*quanmin zaoju*), multimedia remix, online performance art, and online news comments (*xinwen gentie*). Many forms of online political satire have been used to produce derivative texts about China’s talent shows and tactfully and guilefully express their own political, social or public opinions through innuendo. These bottom-up tactics compose ‘the art of making do’; they are different from explicit political channels in terms of fulfilling social functions, as the procedures and rules of practitioners constitute a ‘network of an anti-discipline’ (De Certeau, 1984, p. xv).

Since the mid-2000s, *e’gao* has become one of the most popular and compelling everyday practices of online political satire in China. The neologism *e’gao* literally means ‘evil joking’ or ‘evil doings’ but metaphorically refers to a kind of parody or spoof by which internet users satirise original works, existing norms or conventions using intertextual references. These include ‘pastiche, transposition, travesty, burlesque, forgery, skits, puns, and so forth’ (H. Li, 2011, p. 71; Meng, 2009a, p. 53; Yu, 2015, p. 56). The general public began widely noticing the *e’gao* culture craze as a result of an online parody video called *A Bloody Case Caused by a Steamed Bun* (*Yige maotou yinfah xuean*, hereafter shortened as *The Steamed Bun*). The internet video quickly went viral and drew significant national attention from late 2005 to early 2006. Its creator, Hu Ge, expressed that his intention in producing the *e’gao* video was to satirise the blockbuster film *The Promise* (*Wuji*), directed by Chen Kaige, as a result of his disappointment regarding the film (Meng, 2011, p. 41).

The term *e’gao* entered everyday Chinese vocabulary as *The Steamed Bun* triggered the *e’gao* wave. Other representative *e’gao* cases include the cyber-lebrity ‘Sister Hibiscus’ (*furong jiejie*), the lip-synching duo ‘Back-Dorm Boys’ (*houshe nansheng*), the popular phrase going viral ‘Very yellow, very violent’ (*henhuang henbaoli*), the profane pun ‘Grass Mud Horse’, and the
manga-style Moe anthropomorphic ‘Green Dam Girl’ (H. Li, 2011; Yu, 2015). All these examples emphasise the bottom-up tactic processes that prosumers become proficient at fragmenting original texts and reassembling broken pieces along the lines of their civic, political and social values. The identities of practitioners can be considered what de Certeau calls ‘nomads’ owing to their fluid, diverse and complex attitudes towards the original talent show texts. Haiqing Yu (2015) summarises a chain of e’gao intentions:

‘resistance’ (to high culture, establishment, orthodoxy), ‘subversion’ (of authoritative or mainstream discourses), ‘criticism’ (of the political and commercial mainstream), ‘transgression’ (of social norms), ‘iconoclastic’ (toward the classics), ‘contentious’ (in its digital formats and channels), ‘anti-establishment’ (in both content and digital mode of production and transmission), ‘catharsis’ (letting off steam in the virtual world), ‘empowerment’ (for the subordinate groups), ‘liberating’ (as a cultural practice), ‘playful’ (in social transgression and artistic expression), and ‘alternative’ (to any normalised practices). (p. 56)

These e’gao intentions demonstrate that e’gao practitioners are not monolithic, as e’gao can manifest complicated and diverse symbiotic relationships within the power structure. Li Yuchun was considered a main target of the e’gao practices related to talent shows around 2005 and after, just when Super Girl Voice was phenomenally popular. Some internet users named her Chunge (literally, ‘Big Brother Chun’) due to her tomboyish appearance and behaviour. A series of sensational online parodies based on the title established an e’gao religion, in this case Chunge jiao (literally, the ‘Big Brother Chun Religion’). This originally started with some photoshopped images of the star’s head superimposed on male bodies, with the intentions of spoofing Li and her fans (Wen, 2009). By adopting various e’gao techniques, internet users further marshalled their collective wisdom to construct the virtual hierarch Chunge far away from the real image of Li Yuchun, at the same time compiling an amusing canon, including ‘eating corn’ as a religious taboo. One might refer to this kind of online networked practice as collective catharsis for other issues. One interesting example is that many students shared the slogan ‘believe in Chunge to gain eternal life’ (xin chunge de yongsheng) or ‘believe in Chunge not to fail exams’ (xin chunge bu guake), posting Chunge’s e’gao portraits on Chinese social media
before examinations in a sort of ritual for good fortune. The intentions of *e’gao* as a tactic lie not only in the case of the talent show star Li Yuchun, but also in other purposes, such as celebrating their common exam experience, criticising the institutional inequalities inherent to national college entrance examinations in China, and satirising the difficulty of the examinations. Although the *e’gao* practice of spoofing talent show stars with their own values did not necessarily penetrate the formal political sphere, practitioners effectively confirmed their relationship with one another in the social structure. They bonded based on their collective media and *e’gao* practices, as well as a result of everyday common identity and experiences.

Alongside with the evolution of internet culture with Chinese characteristics, there are political constraints and economic incentives involved in distorting the *e’gao* practices of online cultural citizenship away from an ideal bottom-up tactic by which ordinary internet users can develop their cultural creativity to reflect on their civic life in an equal and rational public order. Meng Bingchun (2009a) argues that understanding the *e’gao* phenomenon solely as ‘the digital extension of literary parody or the Chinese counterpart of culture jamming’ is inadequate, because it should go beyond intertextuality and integrate its close relationship with mass media and take the specific socio-cultural context into consideration (p. 55). Internet culture could exploit collective creativity to a large extent because *e’gao* can loosen or deconstruct the centrality of authorship; however, this point covers all facets of the practice of *e’gao* (Meng, 2009a, p. 55). In reality, *e’gao* is a dispersed practice. *E’gao* practitioners play different civic and social roles in the established power structure along with the different intentions, interests and abilities of gaining access to online resources, and as a practice *e’gao* aims to guilefully establish a ‘network of anti-discipline’ and face it with ubiquitous grids of discipline. This is an unavoidable challenge, making it necessary to understand *e’gao* beyond the angle of the practitioners in combination with considering the cultural-political context. Indeed, the context entails the cultural hybridisation and incoherence between socialism and the market economy in China that sparked off a crisis of online cultural citizenship.
While *e’gao* empowers internet users to challenge, redefine, loosen and deconstruct a series of established concepts, norms and model characters embedded in mainstream values, party-state regulators are bound to maintain cultural vigilance against the potential loss of their ideological dominance. In early 2006, the SARFT launched a series of documents aligned against the cultural vulgarity of television entertainment. The talent show genre was first to bear the brunt of this regulatory attack due to the astonishing popularity of 2005 *Super Girl Voice*; some pieces of news swept widely around the public sphere, indicating the authorities might issue new regulations on internet videos and order a crackdown on *e’gao* in August that year (QQ, 2006).

In contrast to the aforementioned *e’gao* case *The Steamed Bun* that challenged the only group of cultural elites represented by Chen Kaige, two other *e’gao* spoofs of ‘red classics’ (*hongse jingdian*) released in April of the same year, touched a sensitive nerve regarding the cultural and ideological legitimacy of the party-state itself. The concept of red classics mainly refers to a collection of literature and art works created during the Maoist period or after that eulogise the revolutionary movements by depicting the life of ordinary workers, peasants and soldiers under the leadership of the CPC (Roberts & Li, 2018). Created by Hu Daoge, an online username spoofing Hu Ge’s name, the two *e’gao* works 51 parodied the two red classic films *Sparkling Red Stars* (*Shanshan de hongxing*) and *Railway Guerrillas* (*Tiedao youjidui*). The *e’gao* video satirised the upcoming 12th *National Young Singers Grand Prix* (hereafter as *Qinggesai*) on CCTV in May. As I introduced in the second chapter, this television competition endorsed by the government is often seen as the opposite of Western-inspired singing talent shows like *Super Girl Voice*, with an alternatively strong implication of grassroots culture. In the *e’gao* video entitled *Sparkling Red Stars — A Pan Dongzi’s Tale of Participating the Contestant*, the heroic protagonist of the original film Pan Dongzi and his friend Chunyazi are incarnated as contestants who dream of gaining fame through taking part in the *Qinggesai* and earning a lot of money. Pan’s father is Pan Shiyi, a famous estate agent businessman; Pan’s mother offers

51 See Appendix 6 for the web links of the two *e’gao* videos.
a sexual bride to the director spoofed by the image of a Red Army soldier in order to steal the exam questions for his son that contestants conventionally answer in the competition. A classic dialogue between Pan Dongzi and the vicious landlord Hu Hansan is parodied as the question-and-answer section between a contestant and an examiner. Likewise, the e’gao video *A Railway Guerrillas’ Tale of Participating the Contestant* equally smears the CCTV-produced competition by spoofing images of revolutionary heroes in red classics. These two parodies resisted high culture in accordance with the party-state cultural orthodoxy, at the same time even attacking the beliefs the party established in the red classics.

Nevertheless, it was dramatic and unexpected that the production team of the *Qinggesai* played these two e’gao videos alongside an official advertising video in the press conference in mid-April of 2006, which was originally meant to warm up the official competition and promote it to other media institutions (People, 2006b). As the party-state has purveyed a longstanding voice against cultural vulgarity in television entertainment, this event was apparently different from the stereotypical image of CCTV. The chief planner of the *Qinggesai*, Qin Xinmin, took a dialectical attitude towards these two e’gao videos. As he noted:

This is just a particular expression of derision. Its intention seems not to be malicious. As long as the videos do not touch upon principle problems and malicious personal attacks, it is totally unnecessary to keep them in mind. Meanwhile, these two e’gao short videos indirectly allege some misconduct. We even may selectively absorb the criticisms that the others favourably express.

At the same time, he suggested to online e’gao activists that they report the situation to the production team because e’gao could cause disputes over copyrights and harm relevant persons (People, 2006b). In entertaining a level of open-mindedness, he was more inclined to pay attention to the range of spoofing the competition only, but party-state regulators, some conservatives, and artistic works, such as in the case of the cast and production members of *Sparkling Red*.
Stars, kept their attention on the subversion of positive red classics containing party-ordained mainstream and orthodox values. From the party-state cultural hegemony perspective, the internet was not supposed to be a place outside censorship and regulation, but rather incorporated into the greater cultural-moral governance. This heralded the inevitable collapse of the internet’s public character, though it was regarded as an ideal or potential public sphere relatively outside the manipulation of the party state.

Afterwards, the SARFT, jointly with the Ministry of Information Industry, issued the ‘Administrative Provisions on Internet Audio-Visual Programme Service’, to be carried out January 1, 2008. The party-state regulators have extended the scope of the persistent ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign to the internet sphere. Administrative regulation clarified the supervision and administrative power of the SARFT and corresponding regional departments regarding online audio and visual content. By 2009, the amount of e’gao works had declined further as a result of party-state enhanced censorship and regulation in the form of SARFT along with six other ministries and commissions under the State Council, which together launched a campaign against cultural vulgarity on the internet. At the same time, the anti-vulgarity crackdown had the effect of cleaning up a large amount of pornographic and violent content, but it was conducted especially in the name of protecting the physical and mental health of young people. Many e’gao works that deviated from the official moral stance were deleted from webpages, confirming the authority of the party-state ideological apparatus over the internet sphere much the same as it had over traditional media, such as newspapers, radio and television. Moreover, this move established and improved the self-censorship system in which China-based

52 Found in 1998, the Ministry of Information Industry officially merged into the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology in March 2008.


54 The news is titled ‘Guoxinban deng qibuwei kaizhan zhengzhi hulianwang disu zhifeng zhuanxiang xingdong’ [State Council Information Office of China and other six ministries and commissions initiated a campaign on the wave of online vulgar content], China.com.cn. Available at: http://www.china.com.cn/policy/txt/2009-01/05/content_17056784.htm (last accessed 17 April 2019).
websites signed the ‘Convention of China’s Internet Audio-Visual Programme Service and Self-discipline’ (Zhongguo hulianwang shiting jiemu fuwu zilü gongyue) then became the members of the Guild under the auspices of the SARFT.55

The party-state cultural-moral governance over the internet and corresponding e’gao practice is not a process accomplished in an action, but rather it is reactive and repeated because the expression of the bottom-up e’gao tactic relies heavily on elusiveness, mobility and randomness tactfully disguised as original intention. It is therefore difficult to achieve consensus as to whether a work or case falls under e’gao. Party-state regulators have always paid special attention to the newest trends of civil society to take emergency measures to restrain its development. In March 2018, the SARFT issued a ‘Notice on Further Regulating the Communication Order of Internet Audio-Visual Programme.’56 The notice paid particular attention to ‘prohibiting the behaviours of illegally capturing, pastiching and adapting audio-visual programmes’ with a detailed ban on ‘distorting, spoofing (e’gaoing), and uglifying’ and ‘reediting, redubbing, resubtitling’ classic literary and artistic works, radio, television and film programmes, and online original audio-visual programmes, as well as ‘tampering with their original meanings’. The ‘extra urgent’ notice kept pace with trending e’gao forms, proposing a series of concrete requirements and regarding e’gao as a value tendency that went against the party-ordained mainstream ideology.

While cultural-moral governance over e’gao practices has de facto narrowed the rights of online cultural citizenship by emphasising the duties and responsibilities of the people (renmin) in the one-party authoritarian regime, there


56 The scanned document and more details can be found in a news feature titled ‘Guangdian xiafa “tejī” wenjian: jinzhi shangchuan guichu, hunjian, e’gao shipin’ [The SARFT Launched an ‘Extra Urgent’ Document on banning the Videos of Guichu, Hunjian and E’gao], Chinadigitaltimes.net. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20180601070418/https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2018/03/广电下发特急文件：禁止上传鬼畜、混剪、恶 (last accessed 17 April 2019).
is an apparent tendency where more profitable media institutions — that can be considered ‘the strong’ group in collusion with the party-state cultural hegemony — incorporate the discursive elements of e’gao culture that internet users, or ‘the weak’ group, employ during media entertainment production. As some classic comedy productions, such as Stephen Chow’s commercial films and Zhao Benshan’s sketch comedies on television galas, are part of e’gao culture, the conceptual spread of the term e’gao from ‘tactic’ to ‘strategy’ implies the extension of e’gao practitioners from ‘free labour’ (Terranova, 2004, p. 73) to profit-driven media and cultural workers or artists.

I do not deny the agency of internet users, as they are collectively and individually talented enough to capture the essence of e’gao to detour around cultural-moral governance. The talent show genre has declined, but the degree of fan engagement under the official censorship and regulation pushes more audience members to ‘circusee’ (weiguan, literally, ‘surround and observe’) the genre (Huang, 2014; L. Yang, 2013). The fans or anti-fans after the times of Super Girl Voice have not become as active as their earlier counterparts. The decrease of derivative talent show texts that internet users produce derives from the party-state’s cultural-moral governance in combination with their own aesthetic fatigue towards the talent show genre. Correspondingly, this is a profit-driven opportunity, exploitable to the advantages of commercialised media institutions and their media workers, as well as a result of self-censorship in internet entertainment in collaboration with the party-state administration’s supervision power and the ownership of media outfits. In terms of deploying power over popular culture, Andrejevic (2008) questions Fiske and Jenkins’ exaggeration of the role of fans as consumers, stating that real power resides with producers or, more concretely, profitable media enterprises. While media practitioners share online cultural citizenship among one another equally, profitable media enterprises are interested in converting discursive elements of the e’gao practice into top-down strategic commercial calculation, thereby dialling down the volume of civil society’s voice.
Against this background, I am concerned with how neoliberalism operates under the supervision of the party-state cultural-moral governance, and with how it acts as a driving force in shaping the discursive production of media products spoofing talent shows. The web comedy *The Most Powerful King of the Talent Show*, produced by a small private company, attacked the emotional expression of ZJSTV’s *The Voice of China* through innuendo and black humour. The production team did not offend the powerful media conglomerate, but rather employed a calculated way of adapting popular works or genres with many easily perceived e’gao elements, thereby increasing its number of online subscribers and at the same time establishing a mutually beneficial collaboration with ZJSTV. In contrast, the second case, *You Disturbed Me*, was relatively explicit satire or spoofing of *The Voice of China* because of featuring Huashao, who is famous for hosting the high-profile talent show. Technically, self-mockingly, his presence in the sketch comedy on the CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala was one of the most watched television programmes. This clearly served their common sponsor and Huashao’s personal economic interest. This is because it engendered a sharp increase in product endorsement for him during the festival. While these two commercial spoofs of the talent show were driven by differing profit motives, they were also alternative promotions of the talent show and an endorsement of the official crackdown on the talent show genre. The S2E10 episode of the web-comedy talk show *Roast* manifested a transition wherein the social statuses of some talent show stars, as exemplified by the super girl Zhang Liangying, flipped from grassroots dream-seekers to profit-seekers in Chinese show business. While she and other related guests consumed their talent show stories and poked fun at each other in a kind of superficial spoofing to attract online audience members, the production team, reckless with greed, blended product placements/commercials and stand-up comedy performances.

5.2 Web series: *The most powerful king of the talent show*

Premiered online in December 2013, *The Most Powerful King of the Talent Show* (*Zuiqiang xuanxiuwang*, hereafter as *Powerful King*) is the final episode of the first season (S01E10) of the web series *Surprise* (*Wanwan mei xiangdao*), which
was produced by a small-scale, newly established private company called Unimedia (Wanhe Tianyi). In this project, Unimedia collaborated with Youku, one of the most popular of China’s video streaming operators.

Directed by Jiaoshou Yi Xiaoxing, the low-budget web series lasted three seasons from 2013 to 2015 and the view count of the channel had already exceeded 4.3 billion by May 2018 on Youku’s official website alone. The duration of each episode varies from five to twenty minutes. With the increase of traffic on its videos, not only did the production quality of the series gradually improve, but major media companies began taking interest in cooperating with the series (L. Lin, 2014). In late 2015, the production team even released its spin-off film of the same name based on the web series. Harnessing easily perceived aesthetic style of e’gao culture, Surprise tells a series of bizarre stories involving a penniless young man, Wang Dachui, who dreams about navigating his way through various ancient, modern, realistic or fantastic scenes where he plays different roles. In his roles, he parodies famous film and television works, well-known characters, and stereotyped discursive patterns.

In the case of Powerful King, Wang Dachui’s misadventure involves becoming the television host of a talent show called The Most Powerful King of the Talent Show. The episode implicitly spoofs many controversial phenomena regarding China’s talent shows, and especially The Voice of China. It begins with two short commercials for a real game named God of General and a virtual sponsor, the Association for Iron Ladies. Then, under ‘the tenth episode’, the scene is densely dotted with five lines of subtitles. The prologue cover is similar to chapter headings (huimu) of Chinese traditional serial fictions, as the latter uses several pairs of balanced sentences to paraphrase the content of the corresponding chapters. Except for the last sentence, ‘Do you think that our series will not

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57 See more details available at https://web.archive.org/save/http://i.youku.com/i/UMzQ0NTk1MjQ=?spm=a2hzp.8253869.0.0 (last accessed 17 April 2019).

58 The first six-minute part of the episode is the content of The Most Powerful King of the Talent Show and the second part is a five-minute music video of the theme song as an ending of the whole season.
broadcast after the tenth episode?’, which implies that the series would release its second season in a humorous tone, the first four lines forecast the theme of this episode by insinuating the commonly and excessively used emotional discourses of talent shows.

• How dare you take part in a talent show when your family is happy and perfect?
• May I make start my career [in the entertainment circle] when [my] girlfriend calls me ‘fast boy’?
• It is too unprofessional for a contestant who does not tell miserable sufferings.
• The families of young people who declare that he or she was born for the stage earn livings by selling stage construction materials.

The four sentences are related to the excessive emotional expression (shanqing) of the talent show genre explored in Chapter 3. In the first two sentences, there is an ironic and somewhat nonsense comparison between ‘you’ and ‘me’. The first line satirises that talent shows are full of miserable stories, confirming that a person from a ‘happy and perfect’ family is unqualified to participate in talent shows and even if they did participate, they could not possibly do well. This is surely an exaggerated expression because the prerequisite conditions are related to personal experience rather than exclusively talents. As a response to the ubiquitous emotional expression articulated in talent shows, the second line is a dirty joke narrated to highlight the absurdity of the former by playing on the word kuainan, which literally means ‘fast boy’ but stands in as a homonym for ‘happy boy’. Happy Boy is a title given to contestants in HNSTV’s high-profile Happy Boy Voice. The following two lines further ironicise two aspects of emotional expression, in which it is common to see some contestants tell stories of ‘miserable sufferings’ and/or make resolutions, such as ‘being born for the stage’, in the name of their dreams.

After the titles of the episode, the glassy-eyed protagonist Wang Dachui holds a microphone and stares at the camera, and the skit displays her internal monologue. His voice-over narrates:
I am Wang Dachui and I am hosting a talent show. Recent talent shows have become more and more banal. As an excellent host of television programmes, I must strive to get rid of this kind of situation. Wow, the stage setting is so bad! What’s going on with these judges? It’s a little bit weird! Forget that!

我叫王大锤，正在主持一个选秀节目。最近的选秀越来越俗套。作为一位优秀的节目主持人，我一定要努力摆脱这种现状。我去！这舞台布景也太渣了吧！还有这些评委是怎么回事？有点怪怪的！算了，不管了！

Synchronised with the lines, a set of pictures shows the full view of the talent show scene with sponsor billboards, a broken neon light for the programme’s name, and four judges. In comparison to the high-priced sponsors who had commonly appeared in talent shows, Wang’s talent show was sponsored by a set of low-end businesses, including underbelly operations like forging certificates, opening locks, repairing tires and curing psoriasis. These are ubiquitous in the form of illegal street posters or graffiti throughout Chinese cities, and would certainly strike a chord with an urban Chinese audience.

Moreover, four recurring male actors of the series disguise themselves in female attire and use exaggerated make-up to spoof a panel of judges: Li Yuchun, Shang Wenjie, Zeng Yike and Yang Erche Namu. The first three are the successful contestants of HNSTV’s Super/Happy talent show series. Except for Zeng Yike, they are also famous as the judges of talent shows. Their spoofed character images are easily identified by Chinese audiences owing to use of iconic personal styles, including hairstyles, costumes, speech and deportment. For example, Yang Erche Namu is famous for her sensational and big-mouth comments as a judge in Happy Boy Voice, as well as her exaggerated and symbolic personal appearance with a big red flower on the side of her head.

Wang encounters five freak contestants in succession: a blind driver, a fake indigenous African, a wanted fugitive, a disabled dancer in a wheelchair, and a dead body. The spoofed auditions review the emotionalist expression of talent shows in which contestants, judges and audiences lack any appearance of rationality. The first contestant is a blind taxi driver who says ‘Hello, everyone. I
am honoured to stand on the stage of The Most Miserable, oh…… no, The Most Powerful King of the Talent Show.’ The blind driver complains that many low-quality persons (di sushi de ren) would not ride in his taxi car, but Wang thinks that these people are very normal, and their choices are unrelated to the so-called ‘low-quality’ people. In the next moment, the judges Shang Wenjie and Li Yuchun ask respectively, ‘Why do you come to the stage?’ and ‘What is your dream?’ As I have analysed in the second chapter, these sorts of questions that frequently appear in recent talent shows are aimed at uplifting and improving the onscreen and live audience atmospheres. The idea is to create a sense of self-reliance through this endeavour that fits within the party-ordained moral order, and steer away from egocentric individual pursuit. Nevertheless, the blind man unexpectedly responds, ‘For my dream! My dream is that all people who discriminate against me will die off.’ While he provocatively repeats ‘die off’ in an increasingly elevated tone, the judges and audience on the scene applaud louder and louder. Wang is the only sane person because he is extremely confused with their reaction to the blind and his dream. Despite providing no performance, the judges ultimately give a high score after the blind contestant bows and leaves, further reflecting how they are driven by emotion.

The following three spoof auditions adhere to the same pattern of most participants, but Wang is deeply immersed in a hysterical psychosis where they always give enthusiastic responses to the contestants and their strange dreams. A self-declared African with a strong northeast Chinese accent dreams of talking to 32 female guests, and claims he is the last person of his tribe. There is also a wanted man who escaped prison to realise his singing dream, and a disabled girl who cannot walk but dreams of dancing ballet. The absurdist and exaggerated expression of the spoof talent show scene smears the excessively emotional narrative pattern found in talent shows, outlining the genre as a utopia of dreams. Indeed, the talent show in this skit becomes a stage where the contestants are ‘competing for who is more miserable’ (bican) in the name of dreams by concealing any actual talent performance.
With a gloomy atmosphere, the episode shifts its focal point from emotional expression to the star-formation mechanism of talent shows with a black humorous ending. Wang struggles to control his mood with the presence of the last contestant. A staff member pushes a hospital bed with a dead male body to the centre of the stage. The contestant is named Shige (literally, ‘Big Brother Corpse’). After the spoof, Li Yuchun asks ‘What is your dream?’, and the dead body predictably does not respond. Even so, the judges enjoy his voiceless singing very much and describe it as ‘the voice of the soul’. At this moment, the judges and live audience members have reached the peak of madness. After resigning from the job, Wang is watching television at home and sees that the talent show has provoked a strong reaction throughout society. Television is blatantly filled with reports about Shige, such as releasing his first album, signing and selling his album in public, becoming the cover person of Time magazine, launching a charity foundation, and even having an affair with a female corpse. At last, Wang admits, ‘I am still too young!’ The black humour satirises the commercial star-formation mechanism: the entertainment industry can package an untalented person (even a corpse) as a star and make him successful. This shows that talent shows are just a part of the mechanism in which talents and dreams of contestants are non-essential. In contrast, ‘the voice of the soul’ montage deconstructs the ways in which the industry manipulates profound implications to interpret talents and dreams. This also further undermines the absurd side of widespread and uncured dreams in the talent show genre and the corresponding profitable nature of the capitalist entertainment industry.

5.3 Sketch comedy: You Disturbed Me

The first two cases appeared when China’s talent shows started a second wave with the import of overseas talent show franchises, represented by the remarkable popularity of The Voice of China in 2012 and 2013. In spite of explicitly representing some elements of HNSTV’s Super/Happy talent show series, the first spoof insinuates emotional expression in The Voice of China as well. Meanwhile, the sketch comedy (xiaopin, literally ‘small version’) You Disturbed Me (Raomin
le nin, hereafter Disturbed) in the 2014 CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala is another example of obviously poking fun at The Voice of China.

The sketch comedy genre is a unique source of spoofing that takes advantage of the long-standing popularity of the television gala format. Together with crosstalk (xiangsheng, literally ‘face and voice’), sketch comedy is one of two main comedic genres in television galas. While xiangsheng is a traditional stand-up comedic performing art that takes place typically in the form of a duo dialogue between two performers, the term xiaopin refers to ‘theatrical skits performed on stage or television’ including using stage props and performing physical actions (Du, 1998, p. 382). A sketch comedy commonly lasts for only fifteen to twenty minutes but contains a series of punch lines. In the context of Chinese media art, the emergence and development of the sketch comedy genre is integrally related to the history of the CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala, commonly abbreviated to Chunwan (literally, spring night). The premiere of the genre can be dated back to Eating Noodles (Chi miantiao) in the 1984 Spring Gala. The gala primarily functions to bring a joyous atmosphere to millions or even billions of families in the most important Chinese traditional festival. The artistic quality of sketch comedies has always been regarded as the priority of the gala but also as one of the essential criteria for evaluating a gala’s success. Because it is presented to a very broad audience, the Publicity Department of the CPC has always directly censored CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala. Before broadcasting live, the production team often completes several rounds of censorship and revisions to ensure that the programme keeps in accordance with the party-state ideology. Over the past three decades, the galas have created many actors or actresses out of the sketch comedy genre who gained their fame overnight, such as Zhao Benshan, Zhao Lirong, Song Dandan, Pan Changjiang, Cai Ming and so on. Many ordinary Chinese people may not know of Jia Zhangke, one of best film directors, but few are unfamiliar with the household names of sketch comedians. Some can recite classic lines of popular sketch comedies due to repeated broadcasts on television, radio, online streaming websites, and even some public places, and some punch lines have become so popular that they have blended into everyday Chinese language.
Disturbed features Cai Ming as an acidulous old lady, and Yue Yunpeng, Dong Chengpeng (also known as Dapeng) and Hu Qiaohua (commonly known as Huashao) as a chef, a crazy talent show contestant and an estate agent, respectively. The three young men are a group of tenants who share an apartment as Cai’s neighbour. Many punch lines are associated with the professions and public images of the cast in reality: Cai is a veteran sketch comedian; Yue is a famous crosstalk comedian with a chubby and expressive face; Dapeng is notable as an entertainment programme presenter and comedian; Huashao is famous for hosting The Voice of China and speaking unreasonably fast. The story begins with three young men coming onstage, singing their motivations and dreams loudly. Their neighbour, an old lady in a wheelchair, suddenly appears in front of them, declaring that their noisy shouts have annoyed her. As the chef is worried about his relationship with his girlfriend, and the talent show contestant and estate agent are anxious about their career prospects, the acidulous old lady, in a bout of vengeance, satirises their dreams.

In this particular sketch comedy, there are three easily-perceived spoofs of the talent show genre and in particular The Voice of China that take advantage of the presence of Huashao. The first two spoofs are mainly constructed around the lines between the harsh old lady and the crazy talent show participant, acted by Cai Ming and Dapeng, respectively (see Appendix 5 for the lines of the two spoofs). While Dapeng shows off his enriching experiences on talent shows, Cai derides him with short sarcastic remarks by means of a compact chain of jokes.

At the beginning of their first conversation, Dapeng describes his voice as a ‘dolphin’s voice’ (haitun yin), a term used in the context of Chinese popular music to refer to the highest register of the human voice, equivalent to the concept of a ‘whistle register’ in English. The following is a punch line wherein Cai replies ‘the sound made by your hips’ to satirise him. The first character tun in the term hips (tunbu) is a homophone for the tun in the word for dolphin (haitun). This is a sharp irony regarding the commonly perceived preference for high-pitched voices in talent shows. Cai then gives Dapeng the nickname ‘Mr Eliminated’ (taotai lang) because Dapeng represents some contestants who have
ceaselessly participated in different talent shows. This sort of situation is quite common, and known as ‘a nail household of talent shows’ (*xuanxiu dingzi hu*).

Dapeng gives himself the stage name June Snow (*liuyue xue*) according to the naming method of the famous Taiwanese band May Day (*wuyue tian*). This exposes calculation of some new entertainers and their companies who aim to attract audiences’ attention through catchy names. Meanwhile, his fans are known as ‘blood clots’ (*xueshuan*), parodying talent show fan groups who create their collective identity using a homophone of some Chinese character in their idol’s name. These two naming methods imply a phenomenon of the entertainment circle, where stars and fans communicate through a series of labels made by the entertainment industry as opposed to their own daily identities. Dapeng reveals a string of garlic (*dasuan*) that the ‘blood clots’ give to him as a gift, with its positive implication that he portrays pure personal appearance and hot stage style. Cai nevertheless reinterprets the symbol as an act of sneering at him being a nail household of talent shows as the second character *suan* in garlic is a homophone for the *suan* in her punch line ‘give it up’ (*suanle ba*). The sharp-tongued old lady makes an insinuation against Dapeng’s self-declared positive motivations for taking part in talent shows and thoroughly deconstructs the interactive modes and relationships between contestants and their fans.

Their second conversation is mainly aimed at showing the paradox of the relationship between contestants/students and judges/mentors by parodying *The Voice of China*. Cai first suggests that Dapeng ought to give up his dream because he is a terrible singer, but Dapeng discloses a secret that he thinks nobody knows: current talent shows are a competition to see ‘who is more miserable’ (*bican*), rather than singing well. Dapeng supposes that Cai is a talent show judge and then begins with showing how he makes up his miserable stories. At first, he excitedly and proudly and expressively declares his whole body suffered from ‘powdery fractures’ (*fenmoxing guzhe*) due to a traffic accident. Cai responds by calling him ‘scum’ (*renzha*, literally ‘dregs of humanity’), a play on two Chinese terms with

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59 The term ‘nail household’ (*dingzi hu*) originally refers to ‘a person or household that refuses to move and bargains for unreasonably high compensation when the land is requisitioned for a construction project’ (ChinaDaily, 2010).
similar meanings, *fenmo* and *zha*. Dapeng’s miserable story is easily identifiable by the audience of *The Voice of China* with the high-profile contestant Jin Chi and her story: pursuing her dream of singing after getting in a serious car accident. Cai then turns her wheelchair back to him with Huashao’s help. The symbolic red revolving chairs of *The Voice of China* is another feature of the parody, though it is opposite to the rules of the blind auditions. The second time, Dapeng makes up a quite absurd story that he regards as miserable, claiming he was a premature infant born 9 months early. Cai vetoes the story again and turns her wheelchair back again. Eventually, Huashao attempts to show Dapeng a better way of presentation: ‘I am not sick!’ but Cai firmly says, ‘I don’t believe you!’ In the skit, they satirise the excessive emotional expression pervasive among Chinese talent shows, where judges seem to favour emotional and positive responses even in the face of absurdity. During the process, Huashao plays a supporting but important role in guiding the conversation between Cai and Dapeng with an emphasis on parodying *The Voice of China*. Except for the tactful design of the wheelchair prop, Huashao appropriates the terms ‘students’ and ‘mentors’, which are the appellations that *The Voice of China* uses instead of ‘contestants’ and ‘judges’.

The third spoof performed between the previous two plots is another obvious parody of *The Voice of China*. This is a dialogue between Cai Ming and Huashao. Huashao explains to Cai that they made the noise because their faith demands they loudly voice their dreams. He then further elaborates on the importance of dreams with a very fast delivery, spoofing himself in a way that is reminiscent of his characteristic way of reading advertisements on *The Voice of China*. This is supposed to be considered an implicit product placement in the gala. Huashao hosted all four seasons of *The Voice of China* from 2012 to 2015. Notwithstanding playing a supporting role in the talent show as the host, he was well-known for quickly reading sponsor advertisements during the intervals – about 350 Chinese characters in a 47-second commercial slot.60 Because the JDB group sponsored the talent show, he always started with reading its advertisement without any pauses: ‘The authentic herbal tea and the authentic good voice!'

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60 See Appendix 6 for the web link of the video of ‘Huashao reads advertisements’.
Welcome you to watch *The Voice of China*’ sponsored by the leading brand of herbal tea, Jiaoduobao (JDB)...’ The audience, who often watched the show, were very familiar with Huashao’s advertisements in each episode, and the lines often went viral on the internet. In particular, his public image became tightly linked with the JDB brand as some internet users and media poked fun at him as a professional of ‘selling the herbal tea’ (CNR, 2013; Sina, 2012a). At the same time, the JDB group maintained itself as one of the primary sponsors of the 2014 *CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala*.61 Although Huashao did not explicitly and directly read the JDB’s brand in the sketch comedy, using his own way of speaking fast without any pauses helped the audience associate his lines in the gala with the JDB herbal tea he had promoted again and again on *The Voice of China*. Admittedly, the self-spoof section resonated with ubiquitous commercials in talent shows. However, Huashao’s implicit and tactful self-spoof was actually quite beneficial to the JDB brand as a shared sponsor between *The Voice of China* and the gala. Meanwhile, Huashao also benefited directly from mocking himself in the most viewed television programme, considering he earned 15 million Chinese yuan during the spring festival through his various endorsements (QQ, 2014). Thus, the officially tacit placement of the product reflects complicated commercial nepotism between media outlets and advertisers.

Two significant issues that deserve further analysis are precisely why they spoof talent shows and *The Voice of China* in particular, as well as what elements of the talent show and the genre are spoofed in the two case studies of *Powerful King* and *Disturbed*. On the political plane, these two cases do not touch the bottom line of the party-state ideology. They evade the politically sensitive problems surrounding the collapse of democratic implications and grassroots involvement during the evolution of China’s talent shows. To some extent, their satire on talent shows is an endorsement of party-state censorship and regulation surrounding the genre. In terms of the content, what they have in common is that they both spoof the talent show genre, especially as represented by *The Voice of China* in which contestants were packaged according to emotional expression and

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61 See Appendix 6 for the web link of the closing credits of the 2014 *CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala*. 

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in the name of dreams. These two examples relate to the blind and committed involvement of contestants and fans; both examples target a status quo wherein talent shows have deviated from the original intention of selecting artistic talents. The inference is that the genre in general now operates a set of competitions for ‘who is more miserable’. The spoofs in these examples narrate a series of strange and unrealistic dreams, ridiculing the proliferation of the dream discourse in talent shows.

Enthusiasm about spoofing *The Voice of China* and other talent shows, from web drama series to sketch comedy, resulted from deliberate calculations of spoof practitioners who strategically maximised their economic interests along the lines of party-state censorship and regulation. Each episode of the web series *Surprise* relates to certain classic work or genre. *Surprise* was Unimedia Company’s first influential production. Owing to the small-scale production team and the relatively lower production cost, the essence of spoofing a high-profile talent show genre is an effective way of ‘profiting from association with hotspots’ – which comes from a recent and popular Chinese saying ‘ceng redu’ (literally, ‘rubbing against the heat’). For a company that was a long way from full-fledged production, spoofing classic works and genres was a timesaving and extremely low-budget way to attract the public’s attention and increase subscribers on Youku and other video streaming websites. Secondarily, it provided an access point to future angel investment. They also meant to convert established audience members of classic works to their own viewership. More concretely, the target audience of *Surprise* is mainly concentrated on youth under 30 (Sina, 2015). The production team integrated the discursive elements of postmodern and nonsensical *e’gao* culture with which the young internet users are familiar into their market strategy. The top-down strategy is therefore a process of subverting the viewing experience of talent shows in the *e’gao* discursive structure, which results in numerous, easily identifiable and popular jokes. At the same time, the episode *Powerful King* did not render ZJSTV unhappy about the innuendos referring to *The Voice of China*. In fact, ZJSTV established a collaborative relationship with the production team of the *Surprise* series for the latter’s capacity to understand the entertainment discourse of the internet generation (DZSHBW, 2017; ZJSTV,
The leading actor Bai Ke, who played Wang Dachui, and the director, Jiaoshou Yi Xiaoxing, were both invited to take part in ZJSTV’s reality shows *Simple Life* (*Zhe jiushi shenghuo*, 2014) and *Truth or Dare* (*Zhenxing hua da maoxian*, 2017). After all, ZJSTV is a top-tier provincial satellite channel that excels in producing and distributing high budget television entertainment, so it was open-minded to shift the online satire into an alternative kind of promotion and advertising on *The Voice of China*. Indeed, the channel saw an opportunity to monetise this largescale online movement. In comparison to CCTV’s past attitude towards *Super Girl Voice* in the mid-2000s, ZJSTV has been more confident and tolerant enough to face a spoof on its most significant entertainment programme. Meanwhile, from another perspective, today’s CCTV itself has already not regarded ZJSTV’s popular show as threatening because Huashao’s presence in the gala demonstrates the reconstruction of the relationship between CCTV, provincial satellite channels and advertisers.

Furthermore, due to the differences in genres, these two spoof stories were articulated in different comedic or spoofing ways of expression and narrative points of view. *Powerful King* is an exaggerated melodramatic representation of stereotypical talent shows, inundated with emotional dream discourse outside the earlier critique of cultural vulgarity. The whole episode satirises talent show auditions on the structural level because it conceals all performances as the original main body and gives prominence to the emotional dialogues between judges and contestants. The exaggerated imbalance between the representations of the two sections strengthens the humour and absurdity of the moment but also enhances the force of the satire. According to online comments under the official Youku version of the episode, many internet users found the parody to relate directly to *The Voice of China* because it blends some symbolic discourses repeatedly appearing in the show, especially those by mentors, into its own plot. For example, the question ‘What is your dream?’ the judges ask every contestant in the spoof comedy reminds the viewers of familiar scenes from *The Voice of China*.  

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62 See the comments on Youku:  
[https://web.archive.org/web/20190417123824/https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNjIxNTk3MjYw.html?spm=a2h1n.8261147.point_reload_1.5~5!10~5!2~5~A&s=d1d065eaf1b1411e2a705](https://web.archive.org/web/20190417123824/https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNjIxNTk3MjYw.html?spm=a2h1n.8261147.point_reload_1.5~5!10~5!2~5~A&s=d1d065eaf1b1411e2a705) (last accessed 17 April 2019).
China and the common questions mentors always ask contestants. Every spoof audition is constructed around the question of designing relatively separated bizarre answers as a set of punch lines, and five consecutive spoof auditions eventually accumulate enough of a sense of irony that the show purveys black humour. Another example of spoofing The Voice of China is the numeric character 32 that the fake African contestant mentions. These implicitly resonate with the frequent scenes of the talent show that the judge Yang Kun was enthusiastic about while using his 32 personal concerts in the year the show was broadcast. Yara Kun used these to lure tentative contestants to join his team, since they might be invited to perform at one of his concerts as his guest singers.

If Huashao’s presence in Disturbed creates a self-spoof, the protagonist Wang Dachui is the only one who can comprehend the absurd essence of the talent show scene, as his lines are switched back and forth between his interior monologue and on-scene conversation with others. Wang Dachui calmly faced the utopian craze from the spoof judges and live audiences that specifically saw China’s talent shows exhibiting dreams deconstructed as an oversupply of cultural artefacts with the moral inflation of the party-advocated ‘social positive energy’. Wang Dachui represents the concept of diaosi, which is vulgar and new Chinese slang for male youths of mediocre appearance with no car, no owned apartment and no social connections. The representation of the view from the bottom of society takes audience members away from their past experiences in watching talent shows and surveying the commonly used discourse of the genre. Hence, during the process, Wang’s reactions emphasise the profit-driven capitalist essence of media entertainment in general, and talent shows specifically.

In contrast, the sketch comedy Disturbed is involved with the colloquial theatrical representation of talent shows. Its primary purpose as a live programme of the gala was to make live and home audiences laugh. All punch lines of the sketch comedy are narrated using exchange between performers, rather than a coherent plot design and step-by-step story like in the Powerful King web drama. There are no strong connections between dozens of punch lines done in a rapid and short style spread throughout the sketch. As part of the whole sketch comedy,
several jokes in association with the spoof of *The Voice of China* and the talent show genre appear fragmented and scattered. They rely partially on the viewing experiences of audience members about the talent show genre to create the effect of humour, but more commonly they rely on the language experience of common everyday life because some joke packages are based on the abundant use of puns, allusions and homophones. The leading actress Cai Ming plays a key role in the process of making the audience laugh because her lines are always the punch lines in response to the foreshadowing of others in the sketch comedy. As a consequence, the audience – inexperienced at watching talent shows – could still ascertain what portions were meant to laugh at.

5.4 Web-comedy talk show: *Roast S02E10*

The third case is the tenth episode of the second season of the web-comedy talk show *Roast* (*Tucao dahui*, literally, ‘Roast Congress’). Co-produced by Tencent Video and Fun Factory (Xiaoguo Wenhua), this web-comedy talk show released two seasons from January 2017 to February 2018, whereupon it quickly became one of the most popular web variety programmes in China. The two seasons exceeded 3.6 billion views by February 2018 (People, 2018). Each episode lasts about 90 minutes. Hosted by Zhang Shaogang, the web-comedy talk show features the main roast performer Li Dan and 2 or 3 recurring roasters, a star (or sometimes a duo) with controversial topics as a leading guest (*zhuka*), as well as several related celebrity friends as supporting guests. While the talent show stars make jokes involving talent show stories, spoofing talent shows is not a genuine purpose of the show; instead, the show is a profit-driven product conceived through the negotiation between the production team of the talk show and talent show celebrities. I regard the roast show as another self-mocking example of talent show celebrities that have come along with the rise of their social statuses.

Whether it is regarded as a talk show or a comedy, *Roast* is a product of diverse cultures. This web show employs the structure of the American annual television series *Comedy Central Roast* to a large extent. The main selling point is
that celebrity guests and roast performers take turns making fun of one another, amusing viewers with colloquial comedy known as ‘roasting’ in English. A roast is not simply a comedy based on insult, but a two-faced comedy format in which a roaster seemingly sneers at a roastee, but oftentimes aims at honouring and praising. In Chinese discourse, roast is translated as *tucao*. The term is originally from the Japanese-originated Anime, Comic and Games subculture (ACG). It mainly refers to a spoof way of expressing personal opinions through searching for vulnerabilities in others’ words or behaviours; thus, roast is a face-to-face *tucao*. Roasting cannot break away from past and present Chinese culture. On one hand, as a comedy genre it shares joking methods, such as arguing for the sake of arguing (*taigang*) and revealing buried secrets (*jie laodi*) by means of monologue comic talks (*dankou xiangsheng*). The latter is a Chinese traditional stand-up comedy art. On the other hand, as an online entertainment programme, *Roast* selects guests and topics that keep pace with online dynamics, implying that roast performances in the show are the extension and evolution of *e’gao* culture into the age of the internet.

Premiered on February 11, 2018, the S02E10 episode is themed along the lines of talent show stars. The episode starts with a mini sketch comedy in an elevator scene wherein Zhang Shaogang and Li Dan are standing side by side. The sketch inserts a placement of a skin-care product as Li pokes fun at Zhang Shaogang’s facial skin; then, they both make fun of the hairstyle of an unknown lady near them. When she leaves the elevator, they realise that the lady is the main guest of the episode, Zhang Liangying. She began her singing career after winning third place in 2005 *Super Girl Voice*. After a set of sponsor advertisements, the show cuts to a well-decorated studio with hundreds of audience members. At first, Zhang Liangying sings her original English-language song ‘Work For It’, one of three songs she performed several months ago in the 2017 Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show in Shanghai. Zhang’s presence in the internationally renowned fashion show moved her career forward and honoured China (Xinhuanet, 2017). With Zhang’s singing, the other members of the cast go on the stage one by one like runway models to spoof a Victoria’s Secret Show. The four supporting guests are Wang Zhengliang, Mao Buyi, Yuan Wei-jen, and
Tao Ching-ying. The first two have similar experiences to Zhang Liangying. Wang was in the top ten of 2013 *Happy Boy Voice* and Mao was the winner of *The Coming One* (*Mingri zhizi*), a web talent show produced by Tencent Video in 2017. Yuan Wei-jen is a songwriter and Tao Ching-ying is a television entertainment host and singer. Yuan and Tao – both from Taiwan – frequently appeared on the mainland’s talent shows as judges. After Zhang Shaogang briefly introduces five guests to contextualise their relationships in the talent show genre, the show proceeds to the main stage in which the cast, including five guests and three stand-up comedians, Li Dan, Chizi, and Pang Bo, roast one another in succession.

The first roaster of each episode is Li Dan, who is also the planner and the leading scriptwriter for the web series. In his 5-minute roast performance, there are four punch lines related to the five guests and their talent show stories. Li opens by joking that Yuan and Tao were no longer appearing as judges in talent shows as frequently as they once did because some contestants protested that ‘I would not accept comments made by those who are worse than me.’ He then pretends to be a potential applicant, feigning his reading of the brochure of some talent show. Every time he turns a page, he reads a name of a famous talent show judge. When reading Yuan and Tao’s names, he makes a gesture of throwing the brochure, mocking them dismissively: ‘[I] won’t go [the talent show]. What music dream? [I] do not have a dream! [I] won’t go!’ At that moment, the show cuts to reaction shots of Yuan and Tao, who portray amused and helpless smiles. After teasing the two frequent talent show judges, Li turns his attention to roast other guests who gained their fame by taking part in talent shows as contestants. He shifts from firm to soft tones: ‘it is not every talent show that has scandals. For example, *The Coming One* in which Mao Buyi won the championship has no scandals. Why? Because [it] is also a Tencent’s programme! They have no [scandals]! That’s all I can say.’ And then there is a punch line on the basis of Li’s counter-intuitive finding that it is very hypocritical to praise a star as ‘the next someone’, rather than ‘the last someone’. After he enumerates some popular sayings, like ‘Mao Buyi would be the next Li Chung-shan’ and ‘Zhang Liangying would be the next Teng Li-yun’, he exclaims: ‘Wang Zhengliang entered the
circle through a talent show, is good at singing and writing songs, and is very
talented. [He] is called ‘the last Mao Buyi.’ He aims the end of his roast at the
main guest. He first sneers at her: ‘Zhang Liangying! The third place of 2005
Super Girl Voice! We failed to invite the first place.’ The joke is mainly due to
hype surrounding inside stories about the poor relationship between the top three
contestants. After deriding an entertainment headline that happened in 2015 where
Zhang proposed to her boyfriend at her concert, Li ends with a punch line: ‘Please
continue to win glory for the Chinese-language music arena in your way of not
singing Chinese-language songs.’

In the following stages, other guests and recurring comedians perform their
roasts one after another. Between two roast performances, Zhang Shaogang is
responsible for organising them smoothly, as he often mocks previous and/or
following roasters. Before the following roaster comes onstage, there are a few
seconds of a pre-recorded short sketch comedy featuring him or her and others in
a funny plot, and always with product placement. The main guest eventually
awards the title of ‘Talk King’, which is never the host.

The slogan of the show declares that ‘Roasting is a skill [as one] needs
courage to face it with smile’ (Tucao shimen shouyi, xiaodui xuyao yongqi).
Roasting talent show stars is not so much what the slogan advocates, but rather a
multipartite profitable business that deliberately aims to amuse the audience in a
variety of ways. In other words, despite manifesting some characteristics of the
e’gao tactic, the roast show is restricted to the range negotiated by the officials,
the media enterprise, and celebrities in the show business.

The priority is the political correctness of the content. All roast
performances are subject to official regulation that applies to online entertainment
programmes and self-censorship, so they cannot involve any sensitive issues
about politics, sex and violence. In fact, Tencent Video first streamed the pilot
episode of *Roast* in July 2016.\(^{63}\) Only three days later, due to the appropriateness of the content remaining far below the official standard, the episode was deleted from all China-based video streaming websites. Even after the show was released since January 2017, there are clear differences between the official versions of Tencent and YouTube, demonstrating the censorship gap between domestic Chinese and overseas audiences that is enforced by the party-state.\(^{64}\)

While *Powerful King* and *Disturbed* satirise *The Voice of China* to touch upon the chaos of the genre, including the excessive emotional expressions and the irrational mania of the contestants and fans, *Roast* S02E10 performances about talent shows are articulated only around the individual level, including the identities of talent show contestants and judges, their competition results, inside news, singing styles, and so on. All of them manifest the stereotypical images of the celebrities in talent shows. In addition, the roast topics are not limited to their experiences of attending talent shows but include the appearances and some interesting stories on individuals’ performing careers. They are the repetitions of old stories, awkward situations and even scandals with which the public may be familiar; as a result, roastees care little about being the objects of attention.

All roast performances are subject to the acceptable ranges of roastees. As a matter of fact, roast performances on *Roast* are not improvisational, but created by a screenwriting team. During the process of programming preparation, the production team repeatedly consults and confirms with celebrity guests about their jested bottom lines (Sohu, 2017). Together, along with Li Dan and recurring roast performers, the team carefully creates all roast scenarios on the basis of psychological thresholds that guests can accept, ensuring the situations remain comedic. Because the creation mode makes the roast targets and content limited rather than undisciplined and arbitrary, some punch lines repeatedly appear in

\(^{63}\) See Appendix 6 for the web link of the pilot episode.

\(^{64}\) For example, *Roast* S02E10 has two different official versions. The durations of the Tencent and Youtube versions are respectively 1:26:09 and 1:41:56. See their screenshots at https://archive.org/details/v.qq.com_x_cover_rv1kwqhrykbypro_t0025rmg9nn.html (last accessed 17 April 2019) and https://archive.org/details/Www.youtube.com_watch_vBaGD9WDoZGw3731s (last accessed 17 April 2019).
different roast performances. For example, Mao Buyi and Zhang Liangying ridicule how Yuan has failed to create successful songs recently; Pang Bo, Chizi and Zhang Liangying tease Tao about how often she apologises.

Roasting talent show stars is not a serious personal attack or criticism, and it is easily confused with the bottom-up tactics exemplified by e’gao because it seems to downplay celebrities. However, most roast lines only superficially belittle but actually praise the stars. Li Dan’s concluding punch line is a strong example, where he pokes fun at Zhang Liangying’s preference as a Chinese singer for English songs, but actually honours her as one of the top-tier singers of the Chinese popular music arena. To sum up, the show is not aimed at genuinely deriding talent show celebrities and the genre. Occasionally, roasters poke fun at each other but also themselves. For instance, Yuan Wei-jen laughs about his own husky build; Zhang Liangying actively mentions how she withdrew from the third season of I Am a Singer before many persons criticised her for being afraid of losing. In fact, similar to Huashao’s presence in Disturbed, there is a level of self-mocking or spoofing, considering stars willingly appear on the show for roasting. The show reveals that the stars can take jokes in good humour and sometimes deride themselves to amuse and entertain the audience. Being roasted gives these stars a chance to craft approachable public images that are conducive to maintaining and even strengthening their engagements with their fans and other potential consumers.

Roasting in this sense is a profit-driven act for the entertainment celebrities and the production team. First, the stars consume their past talent show experiences and put them up as roast topics, thereby serving show business. The main guest, Zhang Liangying, is a good example: she started her singing career participating in 2005 Super Girl Voice. Her social status has fundamentally changed, from a college student singing at bars to a top-tier pop singer who owns an entertainment company. Her current boss identity becomes a key topic of the episode: several roast performances repeatedly use it as a punch line, especially because Wang Zhengliang and Tao Ching-ying signed with her company. Whereas many e’gao works during the era of Super Girl Voice were intended to
spoof talent shows and high-profile contestants with implicit political expressions against mainstream and elitist cultural hegemony, there is a deliberate marketing strategy. Musicians who rose to fame from participating in talent shows and who engage in self-mockery of their talent show stories collect not only considerable appearance fees from the production of these shows, but they also boost their own media exposure and thereby consolidate or improve their popularity. The subsequent example on the advertising cooperation between Zhang Liangying and the roast show further expands on this point.

This is of course a golden commercial opportunity for the production team of the roast show as well. Conventionally, many commercial television entertainment programmes cut in advertisements. Roast performances cut in countless advertisements, though they may look comedic or ironic. The conventional means of advertising is often tied to the function of structural intervals considered ‘toilet time’ (niaodian, literally ‘pissing moments’). This is a neologism that refers to the unpopular or boring content that audience members are used to ignoring or skipping. It implies that viewers consciously avoid watching advertisements. At this point, the production team of Roast is bound to ensure that any commercial cannot destroy the continuous, compact and smooth structure of the web-comedy talk show, whether it is a spot commercial or product placement. Otherwise, compared to television audiences, internet users easily avoid online advertisements by controlling progress bars. It is an ineffective marketing strategy for spot commercials to be cut before, in or after online entertainment shows. As far as Roast is concerned, the production team strategically combines its own commercial interest with viewing needs, wherein internet users anchor their hope in the pursuit of instant entertainment, creating incredibly profitable opportunities. This online show does not employ the conventional way of cutting in commercials, but instead develops a diverse advertising strategy including some traditional ways, such as title sponsorship, stage billboards, post-production subtitles and decorated figures, and a series of creative product placements. For example, cast members perform in sitcom-style trailers with funny and nonsensical plot designs, and roasters tactfully mention brands during roast performances.
Various kinds of commercials are not only inundated in every corner of the show, but also deeply blended into the roast performances themselves. The feature about excessive advertisements unexpectedly turns out to be a self-roast target and an often-used punch line in the show, instead of an annoying thing that viewers avoid. The punch line is repeatedly played by Zhang Shaogang and Li Dan. While tactfully and smoothly mentioning commercials, or using them in response to each other’s lines, they always appear very triumphant in pursuit of comedy. For example, Zhang Shaogang completes a product placement by developing a punch line for Pang Bo’s roast wherein he mentions a piece of entertainment news. A new singer, Zhang Bichen, took a job singing a theme song for a television series that reportedly belonged to Zhang Liangying. After Pang’s show time, Zhang Shaogang declares:

I want to correct your mistake. For Zhang Liangying, the theme song of the television series has not been robbed [by other singers]. Zhang Liangying only sings the theme songs for movies [rather than television series]. And all movies for which she sang succeeded at the box offices. So, Pang Bo! Except for television series, please watch films in future, okay?

Then, Zhang Shaogang instantaneously converts his harshness to self-satisfaction, and looking from Pang to Zhang Liangying he says, ‘[On] Lunar New Year’s Day, The Monkey King 3, [let’s] go to the cinema for listening to the theme song sung by Zhang Liangying.’ Finally, a loud gust of laughter comes from the live audience. Then, Li Dan roasts Zhang Shaogang, ‘[You] even placed her commercial as well!’ Zhang replies, ‘What’s wrong? What’s wrong? [We should] treat guests well!’

In comparison to the political implications oftentimes embedded in e’gao tactics, this example demonstrates that the convergence between advertisements and programme content is a money-making strategy conducive to both the production team and the invited celebrities. The key to making the product
placement smooth, funny and attractive to the viewers is based in the stark contrast between Zhang Shaogang’s incongruous attitudes towards Pang Bo and Zhang Liangying. These are closely associated with his public image. As he was famous for hosting *Only You (Feini moshu)*, a job-seeking talent show broadcast on TJTV, from 2010 to 2013, he always questioned the candidates’ career abilities very harshly during interviews. He was mired in controversy for this reason, as many internet users and media criticised his lack of respect for the applicants on the show. Afterwards, partially because of the event, he announced in June 2013 that he would take a break from hosting programmes (People, 2013b). Hosting a high-profile web-comedy talk show is a successful comeback that has reinserted him into the public’s attention. His stereotypical and personal disposition is compatible with the cultural atmosphere of *Roast* because the show employs his sharp-tongued presentation skills toward roasting. On the one hand, he is oftentimes regarded as one of roastees, as many roasters downplay him for fun. On the other hand, he is good at playing to his severe public image to roast the others while hosting. His flattering attitude towards Zhang Liangying and self-satisfaction distracts from and balances his severe public image. To some extent, the change of his emotions helps package the product placement into such a comedic spoof effect.

After the ratings and commercial success of the first season, the advertising revenue of the second season amounted to about 300 million Chinese yuan (QQ, 2018). After the second season since March 2018, Tencent Video adjusted the official platform of the show from free to paid. As a result, only Tencent’s paid VIP members have access to all the video resources of the show. This means that the profitable commercial mechanism has entered an extreme situation: audience members have to pay membership fees for not only watching the show initially marketed for ‘celebrities who roast each other’, but they must then also watch a large number of commercials. Although there are programming resources on other video streaming websites, Tencent Video provides the VIP members with the function of a ‘bullet screen’ (danmu) that allows online users to comment in real-time graphics flying across the screen. This is a strategy for strengthening the engagement between the show and audience members. Some roast lines
encourage online viewers to send danmu comments, so the function provides an interactive layer and allows – even encourages – the audience to take part. The content is divisible into four categories: humorous jokes, abusive derision, suggestions and nonsense (Hailong Wang & Jing, 2017, p. 48). However, the danmu function is a product of commercialising and entertaining the public by accommodating its many voices. Therefore, the danmu function itself featured by the fragmentation and instantaneity of the content is aimed at constructing an atmosphere consistent with the roast show, rather than substantial meaning. Online audiences retain a channel for their own voices, but the channel is actually controlled and manipulated by profitable online media conglomerates. The roast induces the viewers to send a large amount of nonsensical danmu information, thereby destroying the public’s capacity to engage in social policy discussions and negotiations. This has led to a crisis of online cultural citizenship.

5.5 Turning down the public’s voices: from ‘tactics’ to ‘strategies’

While many individual internet users spoof talent show issues on the internet and oftentimes shape and express their own political, public and civic values in a roundabout way, this chapter’s case studies manifest how market-driven media enterprises have actively and strategically adapted the bottom-up tactic in various product genres. This is a radical move from the ‘voice’ of tactics to strategies. In Why voice matters, Nick Couldry (2010) opened a series of debates over the relationship between ‘voice’ and neoliberalism. He argues that voice is supposed to be treated on two levels – voice as process and voice as value (Couldry, 2010, p. 2). The first is a narrative process by which a person can express his or her own views; the second is the use of voice, which Couldry employs in his critique of neoliberalism as a means of referring to a value of judging the ordering of objects or matters. On the basis of investigating Anglo-American neoliberal landscapes, Couldry finds neoliberalism to be a form of hegemonic rationality that has suppressed voice as a process and value. This is because neoliberalism excessively appreciates the function of marketing in everything from economic arrangements to democratic practices. Moreover, traditional mainstream media
products as represented by reality television boost and rationalise neoliberal ideas (Couldry, 2010).

In contrast, as the practices of online cultural citizenship from tactics to strategies are contextualised in the state-controlled neoliberalism of China, the internet is not a perfect or idealised public sphere. Indeed, it is not only closely supervised and managed by party-state regulators, but also driven by profit-seeking online media enterprises. With his special attention to YouTube-like video sharing sites, Couldry (2010) proposes a post-neoliberal possibility inspired by ‘a practice of recognition’ and ‘a realistic analysis of the obstructions to recognition’ in new media (p. 132). However, the extension of satirising talent shows from tactics to strategies demonstrates that the public voice is dually subordinate to market forces and the party-state cultural-moral governance. This is because of inequalities in the distribution of information and ownership, as well as the differences between the intentions of tactics and strategies.

The cultural-moral governance of e’gao works does not target ways of expression or the spoofed talent shows, but rather the implicit diverse values that oppose the mainstream party-ordained ideology. It is unlikely that party-state censorship and regulation can completely eradicate e’gao tactics, which are characterised by mobility and flexibility that outstrip most regulatory practices. While online media outlets strategically integrate the bottom-up discursive tactics of satirising talent shows into their money-making agenda, collusion between power and money increases outlets’ online volume to exceed that of the public. In the meantime, it is relatively easy for the SARFT’s regulators to exercise ideological control when the volume is dominated by several major media players rather than scattered across individual internet users and their online groups, such as NGOs. The point can be captured from the official internet policies, as the party-state has not taken concrete measures seriously to promote equality in the distribution of resources and information across the internet. Instead, it went to great lengths to set up the Great Firewall to keep transnational new media conglomerates out of the internet market in the name of national information security. As this sort of national or collective rationality prevails with the power
of persuasion, what the party-state cannot bear, unsurprisingly, is that the profit model of domestic internet media enterprises uses a neutral distributing centre where various voices come together and have potential to attract the public by delivering those against the party-state core values.

Under the circumstances, domestic internet enterprises are bound to develop new profit models by shifting their main roles from exclusively content sharing platforms to programming producers or commissioning partners. The strategic adjustment does not quite use internet users as free labour, but it still serves the profit-seeking nature of internet media conglomerates. The three examples this chapter discusses represent different models of online content production and distribution. The sketch comedy *Disturbed* was originally created as a performing programme of the CCTV’s television gala and became an online resource owing to the media convergence between television and the internet; both *Powerful King* and *Roast* were commissioned by strong video streaming websites and conducted by small-scale production companies. The latter, as content providers, established commissioning partnerships with Youku and Tencent Video, respectively, to build up their own strengths. The content production and distribution of the internet media companies does not simply involve outreach of their television counterparts, but turns rich big data they gather from online customers into commercial opportunities. Tencent’s *Roast* is a representative case in point. Tencent is one of the largest internet and technology companies in China and its services cover social networks, video streaming, music, web portals, e-commerce, games, an online payment system, and so on.\(^\text{65}\) During the planning and production process, the production team of the show analysed the preferences of online users as per Tencent’s instant messaging service, online shopping platform and other regional websites, allowing them to accurately design the topics to correspond to the needs of their target audiences (X. Xiao, 2017, p. 99). There were a series of deliberation calculations from big data to online lucrative entertainment strategy. These deliberations asked questions such as: Which

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viewing groups are more active online and have purchasing power? Which products are compatible with them? What narrative structures and rhetorical styles can attract them? What topics are popular in recent times? Which celebrities are most discussed online and should be invited? Accordingly, one can understand why *Roast* selected talent show stars to spoof them in the ways with which members of the internet generation are so familiar. In addition, the production team applied data to further increase distribution profits. Only Tencent Video’s VIP members could access *Roast* on the official video platform after the end of the second season. Meanwhile, some online service providers, including Tencent Video, swindled money out of their regular customers by using personal information that Chinese media refers to as ‘big data killing acquaintances’ (dashuju shashu) (Xinhuanet, 2018). Tencent Video has charged different membership fees based on smartphone operating systems, Apple or Android, as well as user stickiness to the video website. Consequently, the process of spoofing talent shows in the show created by online media enterprises reflects their active adaptation to the party-state ideological order, but also deep investigations into potential consumers such as by using big data.

There is understandable confusion between the voices of spoofing talent shows as tactics and strategies because their practitioners use similar means of expression. Superficially, these media products spoofing talent shows are similar to the *e’gao* practices initiated by everyday internet users. These two kinds of spoof practices seem to both be celebrating the diverse and bottom-up grassroots voices, and acting as forms of social catharsis. Nevertheless, the extension of spoofing talent shows from tactics to strategies dilutes the public’s voices and then effectively ‘distracts’ their attention (Miller, 2007). Practitioners of the case study examples I analysed cannot and do not represent the voices of ordinary people, and they work to unbalance the practices of online cultural citizenship. Radically speaking, the process catalysed by the party-state constraints and commercial incentives ambushes public or civic society as opposed to simply integrating some tactic discursive techniques into the existing lucrative strategy. Therefore, I call these media products spoofing talent shows ‘bait’ because they
target citizens to turn them into consumers and set up new online and even social agendas.

Admittedly, the two cases of *Powerful King* and *Disturbed*, are involved in critiques of emotional expression in the talent show genre and corresponding entertainment industry wherein business interests come first. There are dislocations between the spoof voices and the spoof practices due to the contradiction between party-state authoritarian rule and neoliberal ideas. More concretely, the cultural-political mechanism that the two works spoof for endorsing the official regulation over talent shows is a neoliberal hotbed encouraging firm survival according to profit-driven strategies. *Powerful King’s* way of spoofing popular works and genres, as well as Huashao’s self-spoof in the highly anticipated gala are two examples for this point. In the third case, the roasting practice of having talent show stars as guests to poke fun at and their related stories demonstrates a lack of genuineness regarding spoofing and satirising. The web-comedy talk show provides the masses with a channel of adjusting the socio-psychological balance with the slowing of social mobility as marketed for celebrities spoofing each other. While this is true to a certain extent, the show is a disguised means of both honouring and economically enriching celebrities. While blending the ways of online political satire into commercial strategies, the roast talk show together with the previous two examples forges a false landscape of critique, satire, and spoofing by curbing various political and civic values and smothering the discursive tactics of internet users. Because the top-bottom discursive strategies are short of real ideological oppositions, this cultural tendency distracts internet users from opportunities to participate in public political discussions. This may be where the most serious crisis of online cultural citizenship lies.

**5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter concentrates on the extension of satirising and spoofing talent show issues from tactics to strategies. In order to weaken engagements between the
talent show genre and its viewers, the cultural-moral governance of the party-state is aimed at talent shows, but also the bottom-up tactics through which internet users could spoof talent show issues with open-minded public and civic values. This is not only the development of the cultural-moral governance from television to the internet, but also a power struggle between the party-ordained moral order and diverse values on the internet that the party-state is intended to conquer. While the internet has created a public sphere where internet users can engage with one another equally and reciprocally under the grant of online cultural citizenship, the case studies discussed in this chapter suggest that commercial online media enterprises are able to and willing to restructure their profit roles from content platforms to programming producers or commissioning partners in collusion with the party-state’s cultural-moral governance so as to silence the voices of internet users in terms of public and political qualitative discussions. Although it is unlikely that ideological regulators and internet media conglomerates can totally curb the bottom-up tactics internet users employ, their media products spoofing talent shows as exemplified by the three cases have de facto played a vital role in overwhelming the public’s many voices. As the satirising and spoofing practices of online cultural citizenship are unbalanced by inequalities in online resource and ownership distribution, the strong impulses of media products spoofing talent shows seek economic profits, rather than display diverse political or civic values. However, a fundamental contradiction exists between their voices and practices as shown in the three cases. Powerful King concludes with a black humour ending that a dead body can become a superstar in the capitalist entertainment industry; Disturbed deconstructs the reasonless relationship between the talent show contestant Dapeng and his fans; Roast features Yuan and Tao to spoof their frequent appearances as judges in talent shows. With this under consideration, could it not be said that their producers and cast members of spoofing talent show issues apply the same logic of neoliberalism to gain both fame and fortune? In this sense, these talent show spoofs created by profit-seeking media are far worthier of being spoofed through bottom-up tactics than talent shows themselves.
Concluding Chapter

We are living in an age of mass amusement, where the spread of capitalism through the transfer of cultural products has led to an age of ‘amusing ourselves to death’. This process is one orchestrated by a neoliberal order, in which political, economic, cultural and technological forces interact with each other in order to manipulate our views on the world. The trajectory of globally dominated neoliberal culture has been incarnated in the popularity of talent shows that this Western-invented television entertainment genre characterised by mass participation and popular voting has appeared in almost all major countries around the world. As neoliberal orders are not monolithic, the cultural-political implications of talent shows may be historically and geographically contingent and vary over time. While some Western opinion leaders are used to attributing the favourable view of Western and mainly Anglo-American popular culture to the irresistible charm of Western democracy and universal values, China’s talent show genre provides an alternative for understanding how neoliberal mass-mediated entertainment culture expands and then accommodates China’s postsocialist nature. Owing to the huge scale of China’s media market as well as the significant role China has increasingly played, my research is also a timely examination of how a series of social actors are configured in the politically guided and highly commercialised media system, and how the discursive mechanism of television entertainment is formed and operated in the system.

Since the mid-2000s, China’s talent shows have experienced highs and lows under the direct intervention of the party-state’s cultural-moral governance. Such a continuous political intervention in this television entertainment genre is not simply a top-down approach, but a systematic governance practice. The CPC’s regime employs a moral ruler to supervise, manage and control the highly commercialised media market, other related social actors, and even the value system of the whole society. This point is fully manifested in the transformation
of talent shows in terms of the structural, discursive, and value layers of the genre. As my dissertation has uncovered the birth process of ‘talent shows with Chinese characteristics’, I have viewed them as a genre of cultural products that state-controlled media enterprises manufacture for profit maximum by imitating, introducing and developing established foreign talent show formats. Meanwhile, I have also traced them as a genre of discursive system where politically correct discourses in China are integrated into the talent show formats in the attractive ways to the audience market. Correspondingly, my study has analysed the party-state’s concerns about this Western-inspired genre, the official administrative measures for remaking the genre, current talent show discourses catering to the dual needs of political authority and economic enterprise, as well as the separation of the talent show’s political implications away from a grassroots democratic value. To conclude, I would like to specify my general findings about the transformation of China’s talent shows with the following three aspects: (1) postsocialist production and dissemination; (2) the discursive characteristics; and (3) the cultural-moral governing mechanism, and then to explain the significance of these findings in the relatively broader context of politics and entertainment.

1. The survival of talent shows in the media system of postsocialist China

The emergence and popularity of talent shows in China showed that various decentralised elements, including developing marketisation, cultural globalisation and media convergence, worked together. As the authorities have further promoted the marketisation reforms of the Chinese broadcasting system in the early twenty-first century (Xiaoling Zhang, 2011; Yuezhi Zhao, 2008), a competitive nationwide television market was established with an increase of satellite channels and their own broadcast slots. Amid this development, television channels were bound to require more entertainment based programmes to fill their schedules, rather than relying solely on television dramas. While television stations gained the broadcasting rights of television dramas through the full-fledged commissioning system, they were still dependent on their own production capabilities to produce and broadcast television entertainment programmes. As China’s most profitable television stations lacked the innovation
and creative capabilities to provide for new-fashioned entertainment programmes, they instead aimed at keeping pace with the global trends in television entertainment. This area was traditionally dominated by Western and Anglo-American culture. When reality talent shows were sweeping all over the world in the early twenty-first century, it seemed unsurprising that Chinese stations imitated or introduced successful Western talent show formats.

The considerable popularity of talent shows in the China of the mid-2000s reflected in the phenomenal success of the 2005 season of Super Girl Voice but also the appearance of a considerable number of talent shows, which were collectively known as the ‘Super Girl’ phenomenon. I think that the ‘Super Girl’ phenomenon was one of the most important cultural-political events in contemporary China over the past two decades because it epitomised the tension between different social and ideological forces. The popularity of the Western-inspired genre, with the elements of mass participation and popular voting, destabilised the then established cultural order that the party-state, along with its institutional and individual surroundings, had always dominated through a set of hierarchical dichotomies between CCTV and provincial media institutions; between artistic professionals and amateurs, and between the state propaganda apparatus and passive audience members.

More importantly, as the talent show genre posed a threat to those institutions and individuals with vested interests, the ‘Super Girl’ phenomenon triggered a social discussion about the cultural taste and overtones of the genre among opinion leaders and the general public. This was a moment of contrasting ideological positions from New Leftism to Liberalism, during which media marketisation largely diversified social values. Western democratic values enveloped in cultural globalisation penetrated into the discursive scene of China, and media convergence with the advancement of digital technologies complicated the interconnected network of the mass. In the one-party political system, it was inevitable that the party-state would integrate the remaking of the talent show genre and its cultural-political implications into its own broader and deeper ‘Clean up the Screen’ campaign. In the name of responding to the public’s accusation
that television talent shows were a representative genre of vulgar culture, the
dparty-state gained a moral legitimacy but also resorted to the construction of
social morality so as to impose strict regulation and censorship on the production
and dissemination of talent shows. This is a systematic project of ‘governing
culture through society’ as well as ‘governing society through culture’.

After a short-term low tide, it has ushered in its second wave of China’s
talent shows since 2010 that many foreign talent show franchises were imported
one after another into China’s television entertainment market. Rather than
adhering to the ‘Super Girl’ model of copying Western counterparts, state-run
television stations have imported a lot of foreign talent show franchises into
China’s television entertainment market and accommodated the Western-inspired
genre to the cultural-political atmosphere of contemporary China. I have argued
that China’s talent shows, including those based on foreign formats, have instead
become both politically correct and economically lucrative cultural products,
striking a balance between the officials, commercial media institutions, and
artistic professionals.

The SARFT’s regulators are mainly concerned about whether talent show
formats, discourses and values are able to comply with their ideological and
aesthetic criteria by means of imposing mandatory requirements on the media and
cultural industries. The production and broadcast organisations behind talent
shows are always oriented towards maximising their economic interests,
struggling for survival in the gap between official regulations and audience ratings.
On the one hand, as talent shows are a form of cultural product, profitable media
institutions would not support a talent show lacking market appeal. On the other
hand, it is also regarded as key part of these media’s commercial activities that
they are supposed to cater to the regulators’ pleasure through establishing an
intertextual relationship to the party-state’s political discourses (such as the
‘China Dream’). This is because while the party-state effectively holds the power
of media regulation, commercial media enterprises have to seek the approval from
the bureaucratic bodies from acquiring production approvals to passing broadcast
censorship. Meanwhile, artistic professionals and cultural elites have also become
the main beneficiaries of this new talent show wave, as a trend has developed where they often play a core role in recent talent shows by being featured as judges and even contestants. In these professional talent shows, exquisite professionalism has replaced popularised and grassroots aesthetics. Overall, the transformation of talent shows is a highly representative case of how the interests of various social sectors have been reconfigured into a new ‘balanced’ condition, while the party-state adjusts to the ideological shock of commercialised media and cultural products in the context of postsocialism.

In addition, the talent show genre has played a fundamental and transitional role in the change of Chinese mass-mediated entertainment from television to the internet. The popularity of talent shows with an emphasis on mass participation fits largely with the great myth of internet culture that ordinary individuals were empowered to show themselves and express their viewpoints equally. If the 2005 season of *Super Girl Voice* had not extended its influence and created all kinds of entertainment topics through the internet, it would not have achieved the unprecedented popularity and attention from various social sectors. With the emergence and advancement of online video streaming technology, the internet is no longer an appendage of television talent shows. On the one hand as the number of people watching television entertainment programmes via personal computers or other individual mobile devices has been steadily on the increase, click-through ratings have become as important an indicator as television audience ratings for observing the audience market of television programmes. As a result, they play an increasingly significant role in determining market values for television companies. On the other hand, some powerful online video websites have sufficient funds and technical strength to produce web-based talent shows. As a result, they have become competitors with traditional television media and shared the mass-media entertainment market with the latter.

At the time of writing, the talent show genre is still one of the most popular mass-mediated entertainment genres in China. However, the most popular of China’s talent shows are two web-based talent shows produced and broadcasted on two video websites, *Idol Producer (Ouxiang Lianxisheng)* by iQiyi and
Produce 101 (Chuangzao 101) by Tencent Video. They are respectively the copycat and the official Chinese version of the South Korean talent show Producer 101. The format is to form a new boy or girl band by choosing eleven members from a pool of one hundred and one contestants who are trainees or unknown professional singers from different entertainment companies. As Tencent’s Producer 101 gained remarkable commercial success and created a series of controversial stories in the first half year of 2018, officials issued a document in July of the same year to instruct this talent show subgenre, which is officially called ‘idol nurturing programmes’ (ouxiang yangcheng lei jiemu), to conform to the ‘correct’ direction of public opinion and value. Although my dissertation has not been able to tackle this talent show subgenre thoroughly based on the internet, the recent development of talent shows in China seemed not beyond the logic of Chinese postsocialism particularly because the authorities have gradually raised the criteria for the regulation and censorship of web-based entertainment programmes, as it has been very close to the regulatory criteria used for state-run television media. Hence, this new situation has necessitated the follow-up investigation into the relationship between television and internet governance in China and their mutual influence.

2. Forming the discursive structure of talent shows with Chinese characteristics

China’s talent shows have gradually deviated from the original cultural-political implications of this Western-inspired genre: democratic awareness and grassroots participation, forming their own discursive characteristics through cultural-moral governance. If Anglo-American talent shows and their early Chinese counterparts are articulated around the discursive representations of ‘free will’, today, China’s talent shows have implicitly or explicitly bent towards the ‘moral will’ of the party-state during the developmental process. The essential principle of the moral will is to bridge the differences between the party-state and individuals, as well as

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between the party-state and the market; the result is to remodel the vision of singing and dancing as ‘celebration of good times’. Such an approach is devoted to maintaining the ideological legitimacy of the CPC regime in the market economy. Concretely, this is a process of applying two intertwined discursive tools, concealment and reconfiguration, during which the dream narratives originally embedded in talent shows have been reconstructed so as to abide by the official ‘China Dream’ ideal.

There are two discursive formulas for China’s recent talent shows, which I have analysed in this dissertation: ‘good persons’ and ‘public interests’. In *The Voice of China*, the concept of ‘good voice’ was morally transferred into a representation of good persons or artists with both moral integrity and artistic excellence, being appropriate for the characterisations of not only judges but also contestants. The entertainment discourse of de-hierarchisation seems to be oriented towards the officials’ need to maintain social harmony and stability. Thus, we have watched the original talent show formula transform into a state-approved, harmonious competition for the ‘best of the best’ With this setting, judges with high reputations behave humbly and amiably; where contestants look like unambitious in courting fame and fortune, and where the relationship between ‘judges and contestants’ is reconfigured into the Confucian one between ‘teachers and students’. It has created a myth that those individual dreams following the party-state’s moral will are able to be perfectly compatible with the grand narrative of the ‘China Dream’.

In another talent show *China Dream Show*, a discourse relating to the pursuit of public interests is articulated to serve the moral will of the Party and the State. This show deliberately divides neoliberalism into two parts: neoliberal rationality and neoliberal sentimentality; in this dichotomy, the market is presented as an effective force to merge different individual interests into a cultural and moral order of the collective, social and public ‘China Dream’. The representation of the public interests available is largely based on a narrative logic: while contestants rationally and convincingly demonstrate the feasibility of their
dreams, they may employ emotional and moral persuasion to seek their dreams by kidnapping the market in the name of preserving the public interest.

While the ‘China Dream’ political discourse has established the moral high ground for the consistency between the party-state, the market and individuals and has constantly weakened the democratic implications of Western talent shows, the formation and popularity of professional talent shows have subverted the grassroots complex of the genre in a fundamental way. The aesthetic reconfiguration of exquisite professionalism in the talent show genre can be fully captured in the representation of the benevolent music arena in *I Am a Singer*. By featuring elite artists and singing stars to displace amateur contestants in a talent show format, this representation served two aspects of the party-state’s moral will. On the one hand, social elites undertake the responsibility of playing an exemplary role in worshipping the party-ordained cultural and moral order, though it is actually a profitable business for them to occupy the centre of this most popular television entertainment genre. On the other hand, because the ‘music arena’ is characterised as a trans-border cultural-linguistic professional community, its representation in *I Am a Singer* can be used to prove that the party-state’s aspirations for promoting the moral will have not been limited to the domestic layer of the PRC, but have strategically expanded the party-state dominated ‘moral will’ outside the boundaries of its own jurisdiction.

The cultural-moral governance has also remade the cultural-political implications of the talent show genre through integrating the internet into its governed objects of television entertainment culture. Online communities have never stopped discussing and spoofing talent shows since the times of *Super Girl Voice*. While early online spoofs regarding talent shows often satirised the political reality and expressed concerns with public issues in a ‘bottom-up’ tactic way, more and more online video websites have recently employed a similar approach of spoofing to produce profitable media products, but avoiding involving politically sensitive issues. The radical transformation from ‘tactics’ to ‘strategies’ has distracted the attention of internet users’ values towards a simple and depoliticised entertainment understanding of talent shows and talent show
stars. This implies the formation of a new talent show culture that online media enterprises and the authorities have colluded to create. As several online media enterprises can give more voices than the general public and effectively dominate agenda-setting directions, the party-state’s cultural-moral governance is able to focus on the media oligarchs and then more effectively interfere in what talent show the public is allowed to watch and how the public ‘should’ understand and value the genre. It would be likely further neglected whether the general public could express their own voices and be heard within the bounds of state-controlled neoliberalism. Hence, the cultural-moral governing project of the party-state can precisely determine Chinese characteristics of talent shows in both discursive and cultural layers.

3. Unfolding the power mechanism of the cultural-moral governance

I have studied China’s talent shows in the context of Chinese postsocialism – a dialectical perspective of ‘the historical overlap between the socialist state-form and the era of capitalist globalisation.’ (Xudong Zhang, 2008, p. 16) While media commercialisation, cultural globalisation and emerging digital technologies come together to shape the premise of the emergence and popularity of this Western-invented television entertainment genre, the party-state’s cultural hegemony is a structural power of interfering in the transformation of talent shows in China. During this process, the party-state’s cultural-moral governance has been a decisive force — though not the only one — in reshaping talent shows. The authorities do not simply exercise their structural power through a top-down propaganda framework but integrate economic, cultural and technological forces into the instrumental elements of power. In other words, this is a systematic governance project of combining cultural hegemony with governmentality. One-party political authoritarianism is a significant context for understanding that the cultural hegemony of the regime remains a dominant factor in determining the development of the television entertainment industry and discourse. This structural arrangement has been exposed to the notion ‘the Party leads everything’
(dang lingdao yiqie) that was incorporated into the Constitution of the CPC in October 2017. Such cultural hegemony is not only a condition but also a ruling goal. In this sense, the cultural-moral governance is aimed at governing not only culture but also society. Under this umbrella, other economic, social and technological forces ought to be regarded merely as a set of governing instruments yielding to the structural order as sanctioned by the party-state. This is the essence of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics – that is a kind of market economy dominated and controlled by the party-state. In the long-term market practice, various social actors have reconfigured their own interests in the process of seeking their consensus or common ground with this power structure. Hence, there seem to be only two results for this Western-inspired genre as represented by Super Girl Voice that triggered the cultural-political crisis in the mid-2000s: change or death.

As explicated in this dissertation, China’s talent shows have evolved alongside the former’s path where the party-state’s regulators have deliberately employed a moral lever to establish a flexible, resilient and dynamic network of cultural-moral governance to regulate television entertainment discourse and remould the corresponding political implications. As the ideological regulators can adapt the moral lever to the changing circumstances of deepening media marketisation, the essence of the cultural-moral governance is to pursue the ‘rule by law’, rather than ‘rule of law’, so as to implement effective interventions in the media and cultural market. As long as the regulators firmly grasp the cultural hegemony defining social morality, the party-state can manipulate the evolution of talent show discourse and its political implications, in keeping with the officials’ design. Such a cultural-moral governing body oversees the entire process — from the production to the distribution of talent shows — by infiltrating a series of collusion-based relationships into related market players, such as state-owned television stations, production companies, artistic professionals, and profit-driven online media. Hence, the media outlets, concerned over limited market resources,
were willing to participate in the reconstruction of talent shows by following the party-state’s moral will.

4. Locating talent shows at the intersection of politics and entertainment

This dissertation on the transformation of China’s talent shows has sought to contribute to a long-standing but increasingly active debate over the relationship between politics and entertainment. I have argued that what kind of mass-mediated entertainment we are able to watch is historically and geographically contingent on the processes of conflict, negotiation and compromise between different social sectors in the corresponding political-economic context. The emergence and popularity of talent shows in China is one of the representative examples for understanding the above processes in the postsocialist conjuncture of the early twenty-first century. In the Chinese context, the party-state has effectively enacted the cultural-moral governing technology to interfere in the production and consumption of this Western-invented television entertainment genre. The party-ordinated moral will has been a significant indicator for locating the structural position of mass-mediated entertainment in the postsocialist system, as well as establishing and consolidating its own cultural hegemony through culturally responding to a set of governance challenges resulting from social differentiation, the global spread of Western popular culture, and media convergence between television and the internet.

Whilst the established system of Western and especially Anglo-American capitalist democracy has been deeply engaged with the cultural-political implications of talent shows, the survival of talent shows in China through the cultural-moral governance of the postsocialist condition has so far been beyond the political-economic framework of either socialism or capitalism. It is no exaggeration to say that the adaptations of talent shows in China imply a sensitive and acute ideological dialogue. It is to some extent true that the dialogue implies a major difference of neoliberal elements between old-fashioned capitalism and postsocialism and the difference has a fundamental impact on determining their
own moral orders of entertainment economically and socio-culturally in their own market economies.

This study is therefore helpful in understanding the local but also global importance of political communication through television entertainment when populist themes of anti-globalism and anti-neoliberalism have sharply risen around the world. In particular, a series of ‘black swan’ events from Britain’s Brexit to Trump’s victory in the US presidential election have epitomised this recent trend, in which the moral order of the established neoliberal capitalism has been faced with a crisis of reconstruction through the different frameworks of cultural governance. While this Western-invented talent show genre and other related cultural forms would likely be questioned or challenged by the social morality of the Western populists, the cultural-moral governance of China’s talent shows is a process of rethinking the global neoliberal culture from the perspective of China’s actual conditions. Through adapting the Western television entertainment genre to the non-Western one-party political system, what talent shows with Chinese characteristics are exposed to may be part of a globally universal process of redefining the moral orders of globalisation and neoliberalism. This means that social morality in different cultural contexts manifests the core concern of cultural governance more adequately than laws so as to determine the boundaries of entertainment discourse. In this sense, cultural-moral governance is supposed to be far from unique to China, but is perhaps more pervasive in terms of the nature of the relationship between politics and entertainment.
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Appendix 1 Glossary of Chinese terms

A Gong de yinmo 阿共的阴谋
baicheng xunmeng daxingdong 百城寻梦大行动
balinghou 八零后
barong bachi 八荣八耻
biaoyan menkan 表演门槛
bican 比惨
bimi 笔迷
bole 伯乐
buwang chuxin 不忘初心
Canxing Zhizuo 灿星制作
ceng redu 蹭热度
changgong 唱功
changqu 唱区
chaonü xianxiang 超女现象
Chunliu 春柳
Chunge 春哥
Chunge jiao 春哥教
chunjie lianhuan wanhui 春节联欢晚会
Chunwan 春晚
daju 大局
dang he guojia 党和国家
dang he guojia de houshe 党和国家的喉舌
dang lingdao yiqie 党领导一切
dankou xiangsheng 单口相声
danmu 窦慕
danwei 单位
daode jianshe 道德建设
daode jianshe jiemu 道德建设节目
daoshi 导师
Dapeng debade 大鹏嘚吧嘚
dashuju shashu 大数据杀熟
dasuan 大蒜
Dayuejin de haojiao 大跃进的号角
The Fanfare of the Great Leap
Daxue Wuhen 大雪无痕 Pure as Snow
dazhong chuanyue, wanzhong 大众创业，万众创新
dazhong kuanghuan 大众狂欢
dazhong pingshen tuan 大众评审团
deyi shuangxin 德艺双馨
di sushi de ren 低素质的人
dianfeng zhiye 巅峰之夜
dianshi 电视
dianying 电影
diaosi 屁丝
disu 低俗
disu wenhua 低俗文化
dizhi xifang wenhua he sixiang 抵制西方文化和思想
Dong nan xi bei zhong 东南西北中
East South West North Middle
duanzi 段子
dushe 毒舌
e’su 恶俗
Eating Noodles 吃面条
e’gao 恶搞
fan daode zhuyi 泛道德主义
fandong wenhua 反动文化
Feicheng wurao 非诚勿扰 If You Are the One
Feide genggao 飞得更高
fengsha lieji yiren 封杀劣迹艺人
fenmo 粉末
fenmoxing guzhe 粉末性骨折
fensi 粉丝
fuhuosai 复活赛
Fumu 父母 My Parents
furong jiejie 芙蓉姐姐
Gang-Tai 港台
geming gequ 革命歌曲
geming yangbanxi 革命样板戏
gewang 歌王
gewu wanhui 歌舞晚会
gewulei jiemu 歌舞类节目
Gong yu shan qi shi, bi xian li qi qi 工欲善其事，必先利其器。
Gongchang li laile sange guniang 工厂里来了三个姑娘 The Three Girls from a Factory
gongping, gongzheng and gongkai 平，公正，公开
gongyi xuanxiu jiemu 公益选秀节目
guan wenhua 官文化
guangdian tizhi gaige 广电体制改革
guangdian zongju 广电总局
guodu 过度
guodu yule hua 过度娱乐化
Guojia mianqian wu ouxiang 国家面前无偶像
Guoli sheng 过剩
Guoxiong de yun 故乡的云
Haitun yin 海豚音
Haiwan shehui 华人社会
Hanwu dadi 汉武大帝 The Great Han Emperor Wu
Hao shengyin 好声音
Heimu 黑幕
Henghuang henbaoli 很黄很暴力
Hexie shehui 和谐社会
Hongse jingdian 红色经典
Hongse wenhua 黄色文化
Huanzhu gege 还珠格格 My Fair Princess
Huaren shehui 华人社会
Huayu liuxing yuetan 华语流行乐坛
Huayu quan 话语权
Huayu yuetan de niandu shengshi 华语乐坛的年度盛事
Huayu yule quan 华语娱乐圈
Huimiu 回目
Huihe chibang de nühai 挥着翅膀的女孩
Huobuguo sanji 火不过三季
Ji 季
Jian’ ai 剪爱 Cutting off the Love
Jianchi dangxing yuezhi 坚持党性原则
Jianchi zhengque de yulun daoxiang 坚持正确的舆论导向
Jiang hao Zhongguo gushi 讲好中国故事
Jie 界
Jie laodi 揭老底
Jingjiren 经纪人
Jingwai renyuan 境外人员
Jingying wenhua 精英文化
Kaixin cidian 开心词典 Happy Dictionary
Kangxi laile 康熙来了 Kangsi Coming
Kangxi wangchao 康熙王朝 Kangxi Dynasty
Kaxiou jiating yanchang dajiangsai 卡西欧家庭演唱大奖赛 Casio Family Singing Grand Prix
Kewang 渴望
Kuaile dabenying 快乐大本营 Happy Camp
Kuaile lan tianxia 快乐蓝天下 Under the Happy Blue Sky
Kuaile Zhongguo 快乐中国
Kuainian 快男
Iaonli e’dou 蓝绿恶斗
Li 礼
Li bu kai ni 离不开你 Can’t Leave You
Liang’an sandi 两岸三地
Liangfen 凉粉
Liangge yibainian mubiao 两个一百年
Liaonan 梁南
Liaowei shi dai 裸婚时代 Naked Wedding
Mangxuan 盲选
Meiguizi zhiyue 见世之约 Dating of Rose
Meisheng changfa 美声唱法
Meisu 媚俗
Mengxiang daliren 梦想代理人
Mengxiang daoshi 梦想导师
Mengxiang dashi 梦想大使
Mengxiang guanchatuan 梦想观察团

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mengxiang shengdian 梦想盛典
mengxiang wutai 梦想舞台
mengxiang zhaojin xianshi 梦想照进现实
mengxiang zhixing 梦想之星
mengxiang zhulituan 梦想助力团
mimizhiyin 靡靡之音
minsheng xinwen 民生新闻
minzhu naoju 民主闹剧
minzu changfa 民族唱法
mowei taotaizhi 末位淘汰制
niandezhe wo nanguo? 你怎么舍得我难过?
ouxiangyangcheng lei jiemu 偶像养成类节目
Pac’er Hati 帕尔哈提
paiming sai 排名赛
Pingguo ribao 苹果日报 Apple Daily
qianli ma 千里马
Qinggesai 青歌赛
Qiong Yao ju 琼瑶剧
qipa 奇葩
quan 圈
Quanguo qingnian geshou dianshi 全国青年歌手电视大奖赛
National Young Singers Grand Prix
quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui 全面建成小康社会
quanmian minzhu 全面民主
quanmin yule 全民娱乐
quanmin zaoju 全民造句
qunzhong canjia de xuanbaxing huodong 群众参加的选拔性活动
Quyuans zata 曲苑杂谈 Qu Yuan Miscellaneous Altar
Raomin le nin 扰民了您 You Disturbed Me
Raozhe diqu pao 绕着地球跑 Run around the Earth
ren 人
renmin 人民
renmin minzhu zhuanzheng 人民民主专政
renzha 人渣
Roast 吐槽
rudao, ruhu, runao 入岛入户入脑
sansu 三俗
shangxia dou manyi 上下都满意
shangxing zonghe pindao 上星综合频道
shangqing 煽情
Shanshan de hongxing 闪闪的红星
Sparkling Red Stars
shaooshu minzu 少数民主
shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhiguan 社会主义核心价值观
shehuizhuyi shichang jingji 社会主义市场经济
shenghuo zhao 生活照
shidai zhuxuanli 时代主旋律
shidaigu 时代曲
shilipai geshou 实力派歌手
shitan 诗坛
shoushilu shi wan’e zhiyuan 收视率是万恶之源
shunkouliu 顺口溜
shunmin 顺民
sida weishi 四大卫视
sidabao 四大报
suan 蒜
suanle ba 算了吧
taidu yiren 台独艺人
taotai lang 淘汰郎
taotai sai 淘汰赛
The Promise 无极
thousand-li 千里
tiaozhansai 挑战赛
tie fanwan 铁饭碗
Tiedaoyoujundui 铁道游击队 Railway
Guerrillas
tiyu 体育
tongdu yiti 统独议题
tongsu changfa 通俗唱法
tongzhan 统战
tucao 吐槽
Tucao shimen shouyi, xiaodui xuyao yongqi 吐槽是门手艺，笑对需要勇气。
Tucao dahui 吐槽大会 Roast
tuichen chuxin 推陈出新
tun 臀部

Variety Panorama 综艺大观
wangju 网剧
wangluo zizhi yule jiemu 网络自制娱乐节目
wangluo zizhi yongqi 推陈出新
wangzong 网综
Wanhe Tianyi 万合天宜
wanhui 晚会
wanhui geshou 晚会歌手
Wanwan mei xiangdao 万万没想到
Surprise
weiguan 围观
weihu shehui wending 维护社会稳定
weiwen 维稳
wenhua duliu 文化毒瘤
wenhua tizhi gaige 文化体制改革
wenhua xinxin 文化自信
wenhua zaopo 文化糟粕
wenhua zouchuqu zhanlue 文化走出去战略
wexu 文学
wenyi 文艺
wenyi jiemu 文艺节目
Wo relian de guxiang 我热恋的故乡
My Beloved Hometown
Wo yao geini 我要给你 I Will Give You
Wode zuguo 我的祖国 My Motherland
Woju 蜗居 Snail House/Dwelling
Narrowness

wuchang 无常
Wudeng jiang 五灯奖 Five Lights Award
Wuji 无极
wumeishi 舞美师
Wuxingjiang hecheng daleitai 五星奖合成大擂台 Variety Arena of Five Stars
wuyue tian 五月天
xiahai 下海
xian’ge ling 限歌令
xiangchang jiuchang 想唱就唱
Xianggang 香港
xiangsheng 相声
xianhan ling 限韩令
xianlesi yesonghui 仙乐丝夜总会
xianyu ling 限娱令
xiaobing 小品
xiaohai 下海
xiaoli de xiao 小丽的笑
xiaoluo 小乐
xiaoqiu 小球
xiaoer 消遣
xiangtong shehui 维稳
xinchao News Simulcast
xinxiaoxiang zhi gui 信春哥得永生
xin 信
xin chunge de yongsheng 信春哥得永生
xin duopai 新派
Xingyun 52 幸运 52 Luck 52
xinwen gentie 新闻跟帖
Xinwen Lianbo 新闻联播 News Simulcast
xiushen qijia zhi guo pingtianxia 修身齐家治国平天下
xiuxian wenhua 休闲文化
xixuedongjian 西学东渐
xuanxu 选秀
xuanxu dingzi hu 选秀钉子户
xianxu jiemu 选秀节目
xueshan 血栓
xueyuan 学员
yuanmeng ban 圆梦办
yuetan 乐坛
yule jiemu 娱乐节目
yule wenhua 娱乐文化
yumu 玉米
yumu aixin jijin 玉米爱心基金
yuyanlei jiemu 语言类节目
zannwei Zhongguo, chuanshuai Taiwan 赞美中国唱衰台湾
zhandui 战队
Zhe jiushi shenghuo 这就是生活
Simple Life
zhen yinyue, zhen shili, and zhen ganging 真音乐、真实力、真感情
Zhengda Variety Show 正大综艺
Zhengda zongyi Zhengding 真情 Pure Love
Zhenxin hua da maoxian 真星话大冒险 Truth or Dare
zhongguo de xuanxiu yuannian 中国的选秀元年
Zhongguo lan 中国蓝
Zhongguo meng 中国梦
Zhongguo muolihua geming 中国茉莉花革命
Zhongxueweitii, xixueweiyong 中学为体，西学为用
Zhongyangdianshitai chunjie lianhuan CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala
Zhongyangdianshitai zhongqiu wanhai 中央电视台中秋晚会 CCTV’s Moon Festival Gala
zhua zhuanlu 主旋律
zhuanye suyang 专业素养
zhuda jiemu 主打节目
zuigan xifang lieqiang 追赶西方列强
zuimeng ren 追梦人
zhuka 主咖
zili gengsheng 自力更生
zimu zu 字幕组
Ziyou shibao 自由时报 Liberty Times
ziyouzhuyi 自由主义
zongjuesai 总决赛
Zongyi daguan 综艺大观
zongyi jiemu 综艺节目
Zuiqiang xuanxiuwan 最强选秀王
### Appendix 2 List of abbreviations for the English-language names of China’s media institutions

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<tr>
<th>English Names</th>
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<td>安徽卫视</td>
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## Appendix 3 List of China’s talent shows (2004-2018)

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<th>Broadcast Time</th>
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<td>天籁之音中国藏歌会</td>
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<td>Born Us</td>
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### Appendix 4 A brief introduction to three political talk shows analysed in the Section 4.5

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(aired on 13 April 2013)         | Anchor: Dong Zhi-sen  
Co-anchor: Liau Ying-ting  
Chou Yu-kou  
Xu Sheng-mei  
Lan Shuan  
Chu Hsueh-heng  
Mai Jo-yu | TVBS |
| *Boss Talk*                      | Anchor: Shieh Jhy-wey  
Feng Guang-yuan  
Liu Wen-hsiung  
Wang Rui-de  
Chung Nian-huang | FTV News Channel |
| *Yung-Kang’s Brainstorming Show*  
(aired on 15 April 2013)         | Anchor: Chen Yung-kang  
Lo Shu-Le  
Yao Li-Ming  
Huang Guang-chin | Next TV |
Appendix 5 Two paragraphs of lines in the sketch comedy, *You Disturbed Me*

[1]
Cai: You are the noisiest person of the three, [and you] have sung that song from morning to night. Can you make a sound like human beings?
Dapeng: No, I was practising the whistle register. Do you know what the whistle register is?
Cai: Is that the sound made by your hips in the audition?
Dapeng: Tell you! Do not humiliate a future superstar, okay?
Cai: You don’t have a future. (Dapeng: me?) The best thing you can expect from being on talent shows is to place in the top 4900 of 5000. [So] the people will give you the nickname Mr Eliminated.
Dapeng: No…what is Mr Eliminated? Who is called as Mr Eliminated? I have a stage name. Do you know May Day (a Taiwanese band)?
Cai: Er?
Dapeng: I am ‘June Snow’ (*Liuyue Xue*).
Cai: Oh, you’ve been wronged to death!
Dapeng: I don’t feel like I have been wronged. I have fans now.
Cai: The two guys (Huashao and Yue)?
Dapeng: They are not qualified. I have a fan group. As June Snow, my fan group’s name also has a Chinese character of *Xue*. They are *Xue*……
Cai: Xuenarui (the Chinese name of Schnauzer, a dog breed type)?
……
Dapeng: … My fans are not called Xuenarui. My fans are named Xueshuan (literally, ‘blood clot’).
Cai: What?
Dapeng: [The name] symbolises that I, June Snow, am tightly tied to their hearts. So [they] are Xueshuan.
Cai: Ouch, what extent do your fans block up?
Dapeng: I…I won’t allow you to criticise my fans. They are so kind to me! Look, they even gave me gifts. (Dapeng shows off a string of garlic)
Cai: Garlic? (Dapeng: Ah.) What does it mean?
Dapeng: It symbolises their fondness for me like the garlic, [because I have] a white appearance and a ‘spicy’ stage show.
Cai: You thought about this too much. They meant that you should give up.
Dapeng: Dudes, peel a clove of garlic and then use it to disinfect the mouth of the old lady!

[2]
Dapeng: Why do you always attack him (Yue)?
Cai: Then I am coming to attack you, Mr Eliminated. [Why] don’t you change the dream? Owing to your singing ability, I would guess you could not place in the top three even if only two people take part in the competition.
Dapeng: No, do you think that current talent shows actually involve competing based on singing skill?
Cai: For what?
Dapeng: The competition is over who is most miserable. (Huashao: Ah?) I am very miserable. I have a lot of stories.
Huashao: Eh, yes yes yes…Hurry up, tell them to the old lady! (Huashao changes his tone from a real estate agent to a television host of some talent show.) This student, here we are with the most important moment. Do you wanna say any words to the mentor? Tell your miserable [story] to the mentor, please.
Dapeng: Teacher Judge, I am sick.
Cai: I’ve found it!
Cai: Powder? Then you are just scum.
Dapeng: I am scum? … How could you turn back? (Cai turns the direction of her wheelchair back to Dapeng.)
Huashao: Old lady, this contestant is actually very good. Let’s listen to his story again. (Huashao turns the front of Caiming’s wheelchair towards Dapeng.) Let’s give the mentor another chance!
Dapeng: Teacher Judge, do you think that I am very healthy?
Cai: No!
Dapeng: So that’s right. I was a weak child because I was a premature infant. I was born nine months early.

Cai: Child, [your mother] was not pregnant with you.

Dapeng: I was not…. hey, Teacher Judge, don’t turn back. I have many illnesses. I can make up a new one for you.

Huashao: Hush, how can you be selected when you always say you are sick? Look at me! Teacher Judge, I am not sick.

Cai: I don’t believe you! (Dapeng laughs at Huashao loudly)
Appendix 6 List of primary video sources analysed in the dissertation

Chapter 2

• The finale of the 2005 season of *Super Girl Voice*:
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.com/watchvcm-BJTel0Fkt7431

Chapter 3

• Perhat’s audition in the end of *The Voice of China S3E3*  
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.dailymotion.comvideox22u3xa  
• Judges’ words at the beginning of *The Voice of China S3E1*  
  https://archive.org/details/Httpsv.qq.comcoverji9tpb0vsn0uj7.html  
• Yang Pei’s audition in *China Dream Show*  
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchv4jRsGZ4V6Vo  
• The official playlist of *China Dream Show*  

Chapter 4

• The official playlist of *I Am a Singer*  
  https://web.archive.org/web/20171218034047/http://so.mgtv.com/so/k-我是歌手  
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchvTyU5b9yoK9Qt1948s  
• Boss Talk (14-04-2013):  
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchvTRd0QIn3ELwt149s  
• Yung-Kang’s Brainstorming Show (15-04-2013)-Part 1:  
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchvYyvL7hJDtLast35s  
• Yung-Kang’s Brainstorming Show (15-04-2013)-Part 2:  
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchvqJGT_bPVE2c

Chapter 5

• *Sparkling Red Stars — A Pan Dongzi’s Tale of Participating the Contestant*  
  https://archive.org/details/Www.youtube.comwatchvWY0ajTQ1Nr4  
• *A Railway Guerrillas’ Tale of Participating the Contestant*  
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchvkAcxP__OxU  
• *Surprise S01E10: The Most Powerful King of the Talent Show*  
  https://archive.org/details/Http:vosku.com__showid_XNlitNTk9MiYu.htmlspma2h1n.8261147.point_reload_1.551052  
• *You Disturbed Me:*  
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchv9d57iVMGf8Da94b7f
• The video of ‘Huashao reads advertisements’:
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchv4RhBRCakOCU
• The closing credits of the 2014 CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchv7pKHsPcQot4
• The first 15 minutes of the pilot episode of Roast
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchvfiTgjFZEGQo
• Roast S02E10 (Youtube Version)
  https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchvBaGD9WDoZGwt3731s