

**Reality Television in the Chinese Mediascape: A
Case Study of the Reality-Variety Program Who's the
Murderer**

**by
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Abstract

Reality television is playing an increasingly important role in our daily lives; however, there have been insufficient research on the topic, especially in the reality-variety format. In Western public opinion, it is believed that the Chinese media system is dictated by the CCP, that it is more valuable to study informational content, and that Chinese audiences are passive consumers. However, an analysis of the reality program *Who's the Murderer* will suggest otherwise. The analysis for the project was three-fold: (1) an analysis the production and political economy of culture; (2) textual analysis of the program contents; and (3) audience reception of the show based on the analysis of Weibo posts. This study demonstrates that the market forces are playing an increasing role in media production, there exists a blending of informational content and entertainment content within reality television, that the content may lead to social activism, and that Chinese audiences are active participants in the online environment.

Keywords: Chinese entertainment media; reality television; critical cultural studies; audience reception

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

In contemporary society, people are spending an increasing amount of time on entertainment. This has led to an increase in the production of entertainment content in the media environment. Critics claim that the vast amounts of, and different varieties of, entertainment media is taking audience attention away from more serious, political, and social issues. This essay looks at the history and development of reality television, focusing on the Chinese media environment.

Meng (2018) discusses three main reasons for neglect in Western research on Chinese entertainment media, including reality television. First, Western media researchers assume that the Chinese Party-state is omnipotent, having authoritarian control over all aspects of Chinese life (Meng, 2018, 91). Through the promotion of Party ideology, it is assumed that the state has coercive control over every Chinese individual. This perspective neglects the fact that any media content produced is the result of a negotiation between three factors: 1) the state's directives; 2) the market forces; and 3) the role of the producers). By only focusing on media content that is distributed by the State, such as official propaganda messages, news content, and policies passed, a large portion of the media sector is missing. While it is true that the State does have much control over media production through different policies and regulations, it is not the only force as suggested in the West. In fact, entertainment content produced by private companies has had profound impacts on mainstream media content. China Central Television (CCTV), as the official voice of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has absorbed many characteristics of entertainment media since the 1990s to remain competitive. In the broadcast of news content, "a dramatic storyline and a human-interest angle are considered important" due to such changes (Bai, 2005, 2). In addition, CCTV has carried out a news revolution adopting certain commercialization practices as early as 1993 to attract more audience attention. Second, in the liberal perspective, informational content, representing "public issues", is preferred over entertainment content, representing "private issues", because it is less about narratives and emotions and more about "facts" (Meng, 2018, 92). While it is true that certain reality programs, such as *The Bachelor* or *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, are merely for

entertainment, there are many other types of entertainment media in Chinese society that are educational and thought-provoking. Carpini and Williams (2000) state that the distinction between news and entertainment has been artificially created in the United States in the 1990s. Therefore, it is important not to rule out all entertainment media simply because it is labelled as “entertainment”. Lastly, there is an assumption of a monolithic Chinese society, where “contestation over discourse and meaning only takes place between the state and society” (Meng, 2018, 92). The active participation of, for example, Little Pinkos in Tsai Ing-wen’s election, is largely overlooked in Western discourses (Meng, 2016, 134). There has been some audience reception research conducted in China, including looking at how audiences perceive different characters on reality television and television dramas (Cai, 2016; Zhang, 2019), how Chinese audiences perceive foreign content broadcasted in China (Jirattikorn, 2021; Li, 2019; Shao, 2020; Tan, 2011), how online participation have worked against state censorship of foreign content (Peng, 2016), and how foreigners in China perceive Chinese content made about their places of origin (Xiang, 2018). However, all such studies focus on the influence of foreign content or foreign power structures on Chinese audiences. Even the many studies of Super Girls, have mainly focused on the democratic value (a Western concept) of the show (Cheng, Wu, & Chi, 2019; Cui & Zhang, 2017; Huang, 2014; Huang, 2018; Jian & Liu, 2009; Wu, 2011). This study fills the gap by exploring how audiences perceive a reality program that is able to fill in the gap in the Chinese media environment by discussing a neglected issue in mainstream Chinese media.

According to Ouellette and Hay, reality television teaches audiences the ways in which they should self-actualize in a world of market competition (Phelan, 2018, 544). In this light, it can be said that viewers’ behaviours and personalities are moulded and shaped by what media they consume. Reality television emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a cheap way to fill the often-vacant daytime broadcasting in the United States. It was popularized in the 1990s through programs such as reality competitions, Big Brother, and singing competitions, American Idol, all showcasing “ordinary” people. In the Chinese context, reality television formats were imported in the early 2000s, with an initial height in 2004 exemplified through Super Girls, produced by Hunan Satellite TV (HSTV). However, in recent years, the reality-variety format gained popularity, a format that was initially developed by the South Korean media sector. In such formats, ordinary participants are replaced by celebrities, partaking in competitions such as I am a Singer (

我是歌手), games such as Trump Card (王牌对王牌), or revealing some aspect of celebrity lifestyles, such as Viva La Romance (妻子的浪漫旅行). Being a heavily regulated industry in China, the dominant discourses of media messages are required to fulfill certain social responsibilities, such as promoting “social harmony”. Nonetheless, audiences should not be taken as having no impact on media messages, or as to be passively consuming media messages. In relation to Meng’s three assumptions, I will argue that: 1) advertisers do not only influence media content through product placement and membership, but they have the ability to guide the storyline of Who’s the Murderer; 2) Who’s the Murderer provides social guidance and public education for its audiences, and through the discussion of socially important issues, provide audiences with messages beyond pure entertainment; and 3) while audiences do watch the show for its entertainment value, many also appreciate the show for spotlighting topics that have been ignored in mainstream media, and that audiences can connect messages of the show with wider social issues.

Chapter 2.

History of Chinese Mediascape

China's media industry is heavily influenced by two conflicting and collaborating forces. On the one hand, the media industry is heavily regulated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), through agencies such as the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA, since 2018), previously the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT, 1998-2013), and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT, 2013-2018). Such agencies are "government departments subject to PD (Propaganda Department) directives" (Zhao, 2008, 26), and operate differently as under Western neoliberal models where the government regulated the media "at arm's length". The CCP would authorize relevant government departments to operate a media structure that it preferred (Zhao, 2008, 26). This means any media content produced must be reviewed by relevant government departments to ensure its adherence to the party line. As such the PD, the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP), and NRFT, as well as their local counterparts, have permanent staff working in media monitoring (Zhao, 2008, 31). Media monitors are responsible for evaluating media content to ensure "their overall political orientation and their adherence to the party's propaganda disciplines and the state's broadcasting rules and regulations" (Zhao, 2008, 31). In this regard, as reported by *Xinhua Net* (2010), "television production shall aim at the double harvest in both ideological orientation and large viewership" (Huang, 2014, 146). "Chinese culture" should be at the center, and there should be guidance against Western influences, including "Westernization" and "disintegration" of China, as well as being against "Western cultural invasion" of China (Zhao, 2008, 140). However, there are some inherent flaws with this perception as well, such as seeing "Chinese culture" as one entity, while at the same time celebrating China as having "65 ethnicities".

The CCTV's New Year's Gala, for example, invites ethnic performances to the stage every year, in order to celebrate the multiplicity of ethnicities present in China during one of its most important holidays. However, at the same time, the gala regularly refers to audiences as "sitting around the dinner table enjoying dumplings" while watching the show. Many satires around this idea have been shared online, particularly

by Southerners, as eating dumplings on New Years' Eve is generally a tradition of the North. In his research on the representations of ethnic minorities in China, Fan (2016) have found that minorities are usually seen as backward in terms of social and economic developments, as being talented in singing and dancing, and as having a freer sexual life compared to the Han majority (2092). The different experiences of ethnic minorities may also have an impact on their economic standing. Dincer and Wang (2011) and Lee, Lim, and Meng (2019) have both found that ethnic diversity can be an obstacle to economic performance. Similarly, in analyzing the performance of the materials and industrial companies, Churchill and Valenzuela have found that ethnic diversity is inversely related to a company's revenue, the sales of the company, the return on assets (1720), and the general performance of the company (1721). However, Sautman also brings in the difference between the urban and rural divide to the equation. In 2005, 50% of the ethnic majority, Han, resided within urban environments, compared to 20% of Uyghurs, 17% of Miao, 29% of Zhuang, and 23% of other minorities (Sautman, 2014, 174). Therefore, he concludes that regional inequalities best explains the Han-minority income inequality and that the geographical location of minorities may be the source of economic disparities, rather than the ethnicity itself. However, what may be the real problem within the ethnic divide may be summarized by the Dongjien Centre for Human Right Education and Action Director Man's statement: "the cause of ethnic disharmony in China is due to the sense of superiority felt on the part of the dominant majority who don't care to know how ethnic minorities feel" (quoted in Sautman, 2014, 76).

Nonetheless, the "socialism with Chinese characteristics" discourse is held strongly by the party-state as an "alternative to capitalist integration and expressing 'an ambition of resisting subordination to global capitalism'" (Zhao, 2008, 146). According to a news report in *Guangming Daily*, Chinese "reform and openness is the improvement of the socialist system and the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Zhao, 2008, 289). In 2000, the Jiang Zemin leadership proposed the "three represents" (三个代表) thesis, claiming that the CCP represents: 1) "the developmental requirements of China's 'advanced productive force'; 2) "the orientation of China's 'advanced culture'"; and 3) "the fundamental interest of the majority of Chinese people" (Meng, 2018, 2). The aim is, ultimately, to maintain social stability, while projecting an image of what it means to be "Chinese".

On the other hand, since the enactment of the “open and reform” policies in the late 1970s, the industry has experienced massive economic growth, through commercialization practices. However, critics of the capitalist or Western modes of market competition would argue that this was done at the expense of loosened cultural life in China (Wu, 2017, 1). Nonetheless, market-based reforms were not fully embraced by the Chinese state at full capacity. Initially, there were worries that the pursuit of “neoliberalism as exception” may erode the “party’s professed socialist values and the socialist nature of the media system” (Zhao, 2008, 77). As a result, even though the commercialization and market-driven expansion process took off, the Party-state took heavy control of the fundamental industry structure, maintaining state monopoly in the media industry (Zhao, 2008, 80).

First, a few things should be mentioned about the media system during the Mao era. Contrary to the Western media portrayal of China as operating under cultural isolationism principles, Mao’s China saw the selective importation of foreign culture and media content (Zhao, 2008, 149). Just because the party-state took control of the media and rejected capitalism, and neoliberalism by extension, it does not mean that the country has closed its doors completely (Zhao, 2008, 149). During the Cold War period, Maoism was a “revolutionary ideology and a ‘third world’ socialist alternative to both Western capitalist modernity and Soviet bureaucratic socialism” (Zhao, 2013, 38). Foreign culture has always been available and popular in China. In the 1950s, it was Soviet media content (Zhao, 2008, 149); since then, the importation of American and European television shows, Japanese drama and anime since the mid-1990s, the first wave of Hallyu in the late 1990s, as well as Hallyu 2.0 since the 2000s have all had profound impacts on the shaping of Chinese media content and Chinese culture more broadly. Thus, it was really that Western countries, led by the United States, were the ones to isolate China politically, economically, and culturally, forcing Mao’s China to be self-reliant (Zhao, 2008, 150). At the same time, social and economic policies were oriented towards egalitarianism and eliminating the “three main distinctions” (三大差别) (Meng, 2018, 13). For Mao, there is no difference between the interests of the Party elites and the interests of ordinary people (Meng, 2018, 63), and it is exactly the fusion of the two that allows the mass line to become effective.

During this time, the political, economic, and cultural policies within China were decided and distributed by the CCP and the Chinese government (Hong, 2002, 28). All

provincial and local media were heavily regulated by the state, controlling every aspect of the production, distribution, and broadcasting process. By the end of 1976, all capital cities of the twenty-two provinces, three municipalities, and various regions could receive television programs produced by Beijing TV (BTV) (Hong, 2002, 29). This ensured the distribution of political messages from the Central Party to the citizens in every part of the country. At the same time, eight provincial stations could retransmit their broadcasting signals back to Beijing (Hong, 2002, 29), to ensure some kind of feedback loop.

The reform period, characterized by Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms covered much of the late 1970s to late 1980s. The aim was egalitarianism and economic growth leading to prosperity (Meng, 2018, 155), since, as stated by Deng, "development is the hard truth" (35). The purpose of Chinese socialist reforms was to seek to "develop by its own unique means into its own unique type, always conscious of the other possibilities that it has refused to emulate: that is, Soviet-style bureaucratic socialism... as well as diverse forms of peripheral capitalism" (Lin, 2006, 1). Thus, to seek an alternative approach to modernization that is distinct from both the European and American types of modernity (Meng, 2018, 59). As a result of such reforms, mass consumerism gradually became the dominant ideology in China (Cui & Zhang, 2017, 403). It should be noted, however, that the reforms were enacted "on the promise of developing, not abandoning socialism" (Zhao, 2008, 37). Deng imposed the "Four Cardinal Principles": 1) upholding the socialist road; 2) the dictatorship of the proletariat; 3) leadership of the CCP; and 4) Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought (Zhao, 2008, 37). Thus, the Party is not abandoning its socialist intensions, but rather striving to look for a balance between commercialism and socialism, leading to concepts such as "the primary stage of socialism" and "socialism with Chinese characteristics". As such, the Chinese state continuously embraced market reforms, while at the same time sustained its rule of law rooted in its revolutionary legacies (Zhao, 2008, 38).

In 1983, the State instigated a "four-level administrative" guideline, which promoted the development of radio and television broadcasting at four levels: central, provincial, prefecture, and county (Hong, 2008, 29; Zhao, 2008, 95). The result was a "four-tiered broadcasting structure and a proliferation of television stations at the municipal/prefectural and county levels" (Zhao, 2008, 95). It is also during this time that the state cut off its subsidies for the media industry, forcing it to take on more

commercial features to sustain its business (Wu, 2017, 47). As a result, advertising took up greater prominence, connecting media production to market demands and other measures embraced by the industry to continue its operations (Wu, 2017, 47). Another way to cope with the decreased funding was to embrace reality television, as it is relatively easy to produce and cost less to incorporate “ordinary people” rather than celebrities on the show (Keane, 2002, 80).

In the post-1989 reform period, power within the party became “more dispersed, localized, and internalized by each level of the propaganda hierarchy” (Zhao, 2008, 33). However, it should be mentioned that although there was a decentralization of control during this time, media gatekeepers kept media outlets, possibly even more than before, in line with Party principles. As stated by Zhao (2008), the aim of the Party was “effective domination rather than total control of media messages” (35). The makeup of the television industry in China changed substantially, including the piloting operation of China Central Television Station’s (CCTV) second channel, the Economic Information Channel, and Shanghai TV’s second channel, Shanghai TV2 (Hong, 2002, 31). The significance of the emergence of such channels was that they were now able to sell advertising time, and as a result, producing and broadcasting of television programs in China became increasingly sponsored by local and international companies, as opposed to being financed by the State as before (Hong, 2002, 31). In addition, in a 1989 policy, the State also authorized provincial television stations to provide their service to other provinces (Cui & Zhang, 2017, 404), increasing advertising and private funding potentials. The accelerated market reforms produced extraordinary economic wealth for the country while dramatically reducing poverty at the same time (Zhao, 2008, 51). Since the turn of the century, the Internet took on a more dominant role, leading to more online productions of film, drama, and reality programming.

Government control of the Chinese mediascape through agencies such as the CCP, NRTA, GAPP, and PD are undeniably strong, maintaining that media messages should support the Party-line. Ultimately, there should be a promotion of socialist ideology, nationalism, and the Chinese identity. However, since the enactment of the “open and reform” policies in the late 1970s, commercialization practices have proven crucial in the media industry. To compete for advertising revenue as a result of decreased government subsidies, media producers must deliver content that not only appeases government regulations, but also appeal to audiences.

2.1. Popularization of Reality Television in China

Compared to Western countries, reality television has a relatively shorter history in China (Wu, 2017, 164). Some may see this as an example, or proof, of the gap between Western and local production. At the same time, many of the earlier productions in China were, in fact, transplants of Western, particularly American, productions that have already proved to be successful (Wu, 2017, 164). (However, South Korea has had an increasing influence on the Chinese media environment in recent years.) Since the 1980s, the Chinese television industry has experienced exponential growth due to government reforms and opening-up policies enacted. According to Jian and Liu (2009), the emergence of reality television in China was mainly due to demands by commercial broadcasters and record companies (527), since the first formats popularized were singing competitions, as exemplified by *Super Girls*. As stated by Wang Changtian, entertainment programs mainly served as venting mechanisms for the society (Zhao, 2008, 223), through either directly participating in the program, or engaging in public discourses about the program. It should be noted that audience participation in terms of engaging in public discourses has been a central feature of the format since the beginning. The turn towards entertainment formats, as opposed to previous propagandist messages disseminated by the Central Party, quickly attracted large numbers of audiences. It should be mentioned, that just because the state embraced so-called “opening up” strategies such as allowing for more entertainment and foreign investments, it does not mean that the central government does not still have direct control over what is being produced. According to Wu (2017), the “history of entertainment television in China... is also a history of power struggles between the central and the local, between new maneuvers by the state to continue its tight leash on the media sector and innovations by local producers to break through such confines” (31). CCTV, originally BTV, retained the dominant position in broadcasting news, holding some 60% of the market share (Jian & Liu, 2009, 528). This has, in a way, forced provincial stations to look for alternative ways of attracting audience attention, and many, in the end, turned towards entertainment formats, including reality television.

In the early 2000s, importing foreign productions and creative ideas were the main strategies of the media industry (Wu, 2017, 48). For audiences, this was a favourable change in the mediascape as it allowed for more creative production,

matured the industry practices, and challenged national networks in terms of its control over television production (Wu, 2017, 1). In the “No. 17” document released by SARFT in 2001, the Party-state encouraged the cross-regional and cross-media expansion of media conglomerates, while at the same time relaxing restrictions on media capitalization (Meng, 2018, 106). The result was a highly commercialized TV industry oriented towards profit-making and capital accumulation, giving rise to the “entertainment storm” (Meng, 2018, 107). The 2004 HSTV produced *Super Girls* triggered unprecedented enthusiasm among Chinese audiences, and scholars have attributed this to the ability of audiences to vote and influence the direction of the show (Wu, 2017, 1). Liberal media scholars tended to focus on the democratization implications of the show, exemplified through the ability of fans to vote for their favourite super girl, as well as the undermining of the dominant power of CCTV (Zhao, 2008, 147). Huang (2014) states that *Super Girls* “not only embodies youth resistance acts, but indicates a greater call for change in China” (Huang, 2014, 146). Liu Xiaobao also praised *Super Girls* for being “democratic and equal”, using a “selection system based upon the expert judges, the citizen judges and viewers’ votes [that] contains the spirit of pragmatic politics” (Bayles, 2019, 34). However, it remains questionable whether participation in mediated entertainment can actually be equal or inclusive (Meng, 2018, 108). On the other hand, critical media scholars were not so fond of the individualistic and consumerist value orientations of the show (Zhao, 2008, 147). Nonetheless, the final contest of the 2005 *Super Girls* was watched by 400 million audiences, with the three finalists receiving a total of 9 million votes (Meng, 2018, 109).

In 2007, SARFT announced a series of strict regulations, which were seen to target and restrain the impact of *Super Girls*. For example, audience voting in reality shows was banned per this regulation. As a result, HSTV paused the show after the 2007 season. In 2009, *Super Girl* returned under a new name, *Happy Girl* (Wu, 2017, 1). However, without audience participation through voting, the show lost its most important allure for audiences.

In October 2011, SARFT put forth another policy, “Opinion on Strengthening the Management of Programs Broadcast on Satellite Television Channels (Wu, 2017, 224; Hawes & Kong, 2013, 749), to be put into effect in January 2012. Essentially, this policy put even more restrictions on the type of entertainment shows television stations are able to broadcast. For example, the policy limited the number of entertainment shows

that are allowed to be broadcasted during primetime (7:30 pm to 10 pm) to two per week (Wu, 2017, 224). In addition, it required all provincial satellite networks to produce new programs to promote positive social morality and fulfill “ethics building” social responsibility roles (Wu, 2017, 224; Hawes & Kong, 2013, 749). This is due to the general view that entertainment programs at the time were taking up too much audience attention, while simultaneously deferring attention away from other more socially pertinent programming (Wu, 2017, 7). An important aspect of policies and regulations put forward during the 2010s revolves around the idea of “quality control” (Wu, 2017, 25). The state was fiercely trying to decrease the impact of television on its citizens. As such, SARFT merged with the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) in 2013 to become the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) (Wu, 2017, 224). This merge allowed the regulatory power of SARFT to extend beyond entertainment and into the press, ultimately sending the message that entertainment programs should be taken just as seriously as the press and should be regulated as such (Wu, 2017, 224). In the abolition of SAPPRFT in 2018, NRTA became directly subordinated to the State Council (National Radio and Television Administration, 2021).

Chapter 3.

Characteristics of Reality Television

In the discussion of reality television, the ideas of realism or realist cannot be ignored. Bignell (2014) discusses reality television as being linked to ideas of “ordinariness”, and so in order for reality television to be truly a reflection or representation of reality, it should document the ordinary and the insignificant (98). The representations seen on television should be the reality of the every day (Bignell, 2014, 98). In a sense, reality television “blurs the distinction between private and public and complicates the relationships between a personal experience... and a more broadly conceived public world” (Bignell, 2014, 102). During this process, reality television actually becomes “people television” where audience interactions are embedded into the production of the programs (Hill, 2014, 122). Reality television is seen to be giving voices to the voiceless (Marcus, 2014, 136), to allow underrepresented groups to speak up for themselves. In theory, anyone and everyone can participate in reality programming, especially when alternative media producers are put into the discussion. For example, the CCTV produced *Waiting for Me* (等着我) provides public service for ordinary citizens. Audiences can share with the show who they are looking to find, such as a loved one, a missing child, a mentor, or the descendant of a saviour. Once the producers, with the help of different professionals and social foundations, find the individual someone is looking for, both are invited onto the show to share their stories. *Love Battle* (爱情保卫战) a popular program which has been produced since 2010, gives the stage to young couples to share their confusions and conflicts within their relationship. As stated in a popular Chinese online encyclopedia, Baidu Baike, the purpose of the show was to promote the correct views on love, marriage, and happiness (Love Battle, 2021).

The decentralization of technology allowed more people to participate in the production process, and with mobile recording devices, new distribution formats, and especially social media platforms and the Internet (Marcus, 2014, 138), literally anyone can be a media producer. While the participants of reality programs are “authentic” in the sense that they are expressing true emotions, such emotions are still very much dramatized. As stated by Kilborn, reality television should be seen as “Actuality Plus”

since “producers will have dramatically and creatively enhanced the reality being projected” (Hill, 2014, 124). It is not that reality television is “faking reality”, but rather that it is augmenting and creating a reality that is more emotional, more affective, more sensorializing. The focus on entertainment is seen as liberating and empowering, while at the same time being more relatable to ordinary audiences in its portrayal of the everyday life (Meng, 2018, 107). Bai (2005) makes the distinction between literature and art (文艺) and entertainment (娱乐) in the Chinese mediascape. She states that entertainment is closer to the daily experiences of ordinary people as compared to “higher forms” of literature and art, avoiding pomposity and elitism (Bai, 2005, 4). Additionally, mass entertainment, as opposed to the state's didactic approach to culture gives audiences a sense of choice and participation (Meng, 2018, 107).

While audiences may see reality television as representing the actual reality, scholars have also expressed concern that audiences are no longer able to distinguish between the two. Bayles (2019) has noted that reality television has the power to shape “the subjective reality of the viewer... [and] the political reality of the country” (33). According to the cultivation theory, mass media in general, and reality television in particular, has the ability to influence audiences’ conceptions of their social reality (Stefanone & Lackaff, 2009, 967). The fictional elements of reality television are so incorporated into the show itself that audiences are no longer able to distinguish them from their actual lived realities. As a result, audiences may develop ideas about their social reality based on what they have seen in mass media, but that in actuality departs from their lived experiences. Carpini and Williams have discussed media texts within reality television as being a mixture of hard facts and edited representations of the facts (Wu, 2017, 137). However, it should also be noted that reality television messages can also be seen as prompting audiences to think about real-life events and society in general, urging audiences to differentiate between fact and fiction (Hill, 2014, 123).

Lastly, some discussion is needed about the characteristics of reality television in China. While these factors may not be pertaining solely to China, they are nonetheless crucial to the Chinese mediascape. The idea of “entertainment” became the most salient factor in shaping television programs in China according to Keane (2002, 80). As all media messages distributed in China must conform to the “mainstream melody” that is promoted by the CCP (Keane, 2002, 80), producers need to find creative ways to entertain their audiences. However, as stated by Zhao (2008), the doctrines of the CCP

“should not be dismissed as completely empty expressions” (38), as it “sets the basic terms of the party’s ideological hegemony and thus serves as symbolic resources for social contestation” (39). The “pro-people” take on media messages is very much relevant in reality programs. Once the reality television format was proved to be successful, the CCP also accepted and used it to maintain its own political power by placing soft propaganda messages within such programs (Keane, 2002, 80). However, due to such uses by the state, television stations in China are facing the continued ambiguity of their identity (Hawes & Kong, 748). It is wrong to look at China through simple capitalistic lenses. While the party did embrace certain neoliberal practices, such as privatization of formerly state-owned enterprises, opening up the market to foreign investments, and encouraging competition, China is continuously seeking socialist alternatives to the capitalist modernity present throughout the Western world (Zhao, 2008, 49).

As commercial businesses, audience ratings and audience attention are crucial, and thus, producers must produce content that caters to their tastes. For example, through commercialization, domestic media production has increasingly favoured the affluent from coastal regions as their target audience (Zhao, 2008, 161). The urban middle-class “are the preferred customers of both domestic and transnational capital [and assumes] a dominant position in Chinese media and culture (Zhao, 2008, 168). However, sometimes such contents are against the socialist ideals so heavily promoted by the central state. This is shown through critiques of *Super Girls* as promoting individualistic pursuits while “killing off” losers. As all television stations in China are still owned and supervised by the state, they can never operate completely as commercial enterprises (Hawes & Kong, 2013, 748), which is a defining factor for Chinese media companies.

The Chinese mediascape has historically been heavily influenced by foreign inspirations. In recent years, the two major influencers are the United States and South Korea. In the former, the idea of “big-picture mentality” (大片意识) heavily impacts the media industry (Meng, 2018, 95). This has implications for not only the types of content produced, but also for the business model of media organizations. Profits and losses are now shared among producers, distributors, and exhibitors (Meng, 2018, 95). In recent years, this influence became two-direction as Hollywood becomes increasingly reliant on not just Chinese capital, but also the purchasing power of Chinese audiences. Movie

plots are altered to appeal to Chinese audiences and pass Chinese censors, Chinese brands are incorporated into product placements (Meng, 2018, 98), and more Chinese actors and actresses are seen in Hollywood productions and increasingly featured in more prominent roles rather than in “flower vase” (花瓶) roles (Kokas, 2019, 219).

In the latter, Hallyu is influencing not only China, but also other parts of Asia, as well as the throughout the rest of the world. The first wave of Hallyu began in the late 1990s with the export of South Korean television dramas (K-drama) (Jin, 2016, 43). At first, it served as a cheap alternative for Japanese drama (J-drama), which cost \$5,000 to \$8,000 per hour of content compared to K-drama’s \$1000 per hour in 2000 (Jin, 2016, 47). However, K-dramas quickly increased in value and surpassed that of J-dramas in 2005, which cost \$7,000 to \$15,000 and \$6,000 to \$12,000 respectively (Jin, 2016, 47). Hallyu 2.0, which took shape in the 2000s, witnessed the increasing influence of reality television. One special type of reality television is the reality-variety program, which is particular to the Asian media environment. The combination of variety, fiction, and reality aspects produces a unique form of entertainment that is not seen in Western mass media. In this genre, instead of featuring “ordinary” or amateur participants, all participants are celebrities (Jung, 2019, 193). According to Jenkins (1992), the variety format is aimed at “crude shock to produce emotionally intense responses’ from the audience”, where there tends to be “excessive [sounds], visual effects and replays of funny moments [in an] attempt to hold the viewer’s attention (Jung, 2009, 197).

First developed in South Korea, the reality-variety program format initially made a hit through the popular show *Running Man*, where it “[combined] elements of talk shows, sketch comedy, batsu (Japanese-style punishment game), and sporting competitions” (Kim & Li, 2018, 165). In this program, celebrities are invited to participate in a series of competitions and games under a variety of themes. Celebrities’ “real” personalities and values can be seen as there are supposedly no scripts. Audiences are able to gain an inside look at how celebrities behave in their daily lives. Nonetheless, celebrities still have certain pre-determined and pre-designed “on-screen persona” and “character settings”, therefore it may be doubtful whether these programs are representing authentic personalities. This has led to a distinction between “reality-variety celeb” (综艺咖), “celebrities” (明星), and “actor(ress)” (演员), where reality-variety celebs only participate in different reality programs selling their comedic skills; celebrities may

participate in both reality programs, and television dramas and films, but are depending more on their commercial value than their professional skills; and actor(resses) are valued for their professional skills and only occasionally participate in reality programs, and participate in programs that are often related to sharing their acting skills, such as *Everybody Stand By* (演员请就位). In addition, there is a blurring of the boundaries between the distinctions of the contestants, the hosts, the producers, and the crew (Kim & Li, 2018, 171). Everyone is participating on equal grounds, without the need to conform to social hierarchies and other social requirements. Participants can call out to their producer-director, can bring the director into the conversation, can ask audiences to help in certain “missions”, and so on. Lastly, one important element of the reality-variety program is the on-screen captions, which serve as punch lines and sarcastic commentary, first pioneered by Japanese television (Kim & Li, 2018, 172). Sometimes, such captions are used to highlight important words or phrases, guiding audience discourse to a certain content. It is not uncommon for audiences to reiterate captions in public discussions about reality-variety programs.

In the production of reality-variety programs, often hours of footage are edited into a one-hour to two-hour episode to be broadcasted either through mainstream television broadcasters or through online video-sharing platforms. Due to the unscripted nature of the program, sometimes the postproduction personnel would need to dismantle the materials on-hand and artificially “create” a new television space-time (Cheng, 2015, 57). The directors and producers, along with the postproduction team, may be required to comb through the hours of filmed footage and organize a new, logical storyline that is easier for the audience to understand and follow. In this process, the “scriptwriter” is not designing a series of scenes to be filmed, but rather to “write” a “story” in which the time-space structure has been remodeled using filmed materials in the postproduction process (Cheng, 2015, 57).

Chapter 4.

Case Study: Who's the Murderer

According to Douglas Kellner, critical cultural studies consist of three aspects of media products analysis: 1) the production and political economy of culture; 2) the cultural texts; and 3) audience reception of those texts (n.d., 10). This paper will follow this approach in analyzing the reality-variety program *Who's the Murderer* (明星大侦探). First, an analysis of the production of the show will be presented, setting the background and media environment of the show. No media content can be understood out of its cultural and political economic context; therefore, it is pertinent to put this discussion at the forefront. I will show that contrary to Western beliefs, the Chinese media environment is not simply controlled by the authoritarian control of the Party-State, but is the result of the negotiation between the Party-State, the market, and the producers. For this purpose, I have analyzed the production company, MangoTV, the production structure, as well as the influence of commercial interests, namely that of direct sponsorship and membership subscription. Appendix A provides a list of inspirations for the show, which includes novels, films, television programs, from a range of countries, including China, Japan, South Korea, the United States, and Italy. This will show that the inspirations are from a variety of well-known productions, contributing to increasing the commercial value of the show through other media content that has already proven to be successful. Next, I will analyze the actual content of the show, including an analysis of the social responsibility role of the show through an analysis of the different stories and themes presented. This will reveal that not only are entertainment provided by the show, but that it also has information values, illustrating social issues and bringing topics that have been neglected in mainstream media to be spotlighted. Appendix B provides a list of topics that have been discussed throughout the show. Some of these topics are very broad, such as environmental degradation, and some are closer to the daily lives of audiences, such as the relationship between friends and family. Lastly, I will analyze Weibo posts with the hashtag #明星大侦探 (Who's the Murderer) to find out how audiences actually perceive the show. Contestation definitely does not only occur between the State and the society; the role of audiences cannot be ignored and overlooked. For this project, I have looked at over 3,000 Weibo posts with the hashtag #

明星大侦探 (Who's the Murderer), and analyzed in detail 600 original posts and 1,378 replies to 12 posts made by the show's official account (@明星大侦探官微). From here, a list of 27 themes has been created to account for the range of discussions that have occurred.

4.1. Production and Political Economy of Culture

4.1.1. State Directives

In the Western view, it is assumed that the Chinese state is an authoritarian state which controls all aspects of Chinese social life, “[equating] it with coercive state control” (Meng, 2018, 91). Television stations in China, being owned and operated by the central government, must adhere to strict regulations in terms of what is allowed to be broadcasted and when those broadcasts may be. Even though meeting audiences' expectations is crucial, it must ensure that it can be seen by audiences first. Following the years of economic reform, the media played a crucial role in adjusting its governing strategies as well as disseminating these messages to the public (Wu, 2017, 52). One of the shifts is the change from a neoliberal focus on market-state interaction to that of the state and society (Wu, 2017, 52). Under the leadership of Hu Jintao, less emphasis is put on market initiatives, and more is put on society and socialism in the promotion of a “socialist harmonious society”. Seen as a step back from the economic reforms and commercialization strategies of the late 1970s, the media has an increasing role in the promotion of harmony within the society. As all broadcasted media must be approved by NRTA media producers are inclined to produce content that is aligned with Party politics, or at least to not challenge them. Cai (2016) states that the CCP government has traditionally “[manipulated] the media to provide ‘cultural leadership’”, and that the media is “a crucial element of the ideological apparatus in China's political system (84). Therefore, even though the media industry in China is a commercial enterprise, it is still heavily controlled by the central government.

Who's the Murderer is an online reality-variety program produced and broadcasted by MangoTV, an affiliate of HSTV, one of the leading entertainment providers in China. In 1993, Hunan Television underwent a series of economic reforms, which had the station relying on advertising revenue instead of governmental subsidies (Bai, 2005, 24). The satellite channel, HSTV, was launched in 1997 with an explicit focus

on entertainment as the main theme of the station. In part, this is due to the inability of provincial television stations to compete with the dominance of CCTV in news production, but it is also an explicit decision made to grasp advertising funds. However, the focus during this time was to provide entertainment in the form of television dramas and not in reality television.

The format of the *Who's the Murderer* was bought from South Korean Joongang Tongyang Broadcasting Company (JTBC), but because it is a crime-detective show, the stories which have already appeared in the Korean version, *Crime Scene*, cannot be reused. This meant that, contrary to other popular formats bought, such as *Running Man*, where the games played or competitions engaged in can be directly transported across national borders, *Who's the Murderer* had to look for alternative ways. As a result, the Korean production team went to China to help with script-writing and filming, then leaving the Chinese team to work on its own (*Who's the Murderer* Season 1, 2021). Around thirty individuals work in the production team, consisting of three types of personnel. The core production team members are responsible for proposing topics, then divided into groups to discuss the feasibility of different topics. The individual who has proposed the selected idea will become the main script writer, leading the case. The core production team is also responsible for directing and producing the actual show. Once a script is written, it will be passed to a group of professional writers, who may add more depth to the logic or fix any flaws embedded within the storyline. Other professionals, such as medical examiners, the police, and lawyers may be invited on a needs-bases to provide their expertise. However, each crime committed on the show must include a "bug", making it impossible to replicate in real life (*Who's the Murderer*, 2021). This is one of the reasons that later episodes of the show relied on "brain-swaps", "memory deletion", and the ability to cross over to alternative time-space universes to ensure its infeasibility. Appendix A: Media Sources for Each Episode, provides a list of sources for the content of each episode. Most of these sources provide backgrounds to the episodes, giving the characters a referential backstory. There are also a few instances of inspirations for a way of committing a murder, however, because the setup may already be known to audiences, such references do not reveal the identity of the murderer directly. For example, in S5E7 MGQ Magazine, the inspiration from *Case Closed: Black Dress Alibi* by Aoyama Gosho, where the victim seen on security camera turned out to be the murder and not the victim.

In S6E1 *Midnight Hotel I of Who's the Murderer*, the background was set on Christmas Eve, and thus Christmas decorations were used throughout the set. However, when the episode was released, all holiday decorations were blurred with other non-holiday-related decorations photoshopped on top. Although there was no official statement made by the producers to explain this action, it can be seen as related to an Opinion published by the General Office of the Chinese Communist Party and the General Office of the State Council on January 25th, 2017. "Opinion on Implementing the Project for Inheritance and Development of Fine Chinese Traditional Culture" (关于实施中华优秀传统文化传承发展工程的意见) stated the need to promote the unique culture of the Chinese people which has allowed the civilization to live and grow throughout history. It has also been noted in the document that in contemporary Chinese society there has been a tendency to view all things foreign as beautiful and honorable, while denigrating traditional Chinese culture as being backward and uncivilized.

The purpose of the Opinion is to build a strong socialist country, to increase the country's soft power, and to achieve the Chinese dream of the revival of Chinese nationalism. It recognizes that due to economic reforms, opening up strategies, and the development of Internet technologies and new media, there is an increase in the exchange of, the fusing of, and the confrontation between different ideologies and cultures. Thus, there exists the urgent need to deepen the understanding of fine Chinese traditional culture, and to enhance cultural self-consciousness and cultural self-confidence. It also discusses the need to strengthen the cultural awareness of the Chinese people, as well as to protect national cultural safety. The importance lies in drawing from Chinese intelligence, promoting Chinese spirit, and spreading Chinese values, which should be done according to the cultural roots, through assimilating foreign influences, and be directed at the future. Some Chinese values that the Opinion promotes include to continuously strive to become better (自强不息), to respect work and to respect others (敬业乐群), to help those in distress (扶危济困), to be brave and courageous (见义勇为), and to respect the elderly (孝老爱亲). In artistic creations, creative personnel should be adept at extracting themes, obtaining inspirations, and drawing content from Chinese cultural resources.

In reference to the influence of foreign cultures, the Opinion states that Chinese culture should be at the center, using foreign culture to learn from strong points and to

choose to follow good examples. It warns against a blind acceptance of all things foreign, while stressing that it should be used to enrich and develop Chinese culture. Highlighting the idea of “our festivals” (我们的节日), it promotes strengthening traditional Chinese holidays and festival meanings while forming new festival customs through promoting Chinese New Years (春节), Lantern Festival (元宵节), Qingming Festival (清明节), Dragon Boat Festival (端午节), Qixi Festival (七夕), Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋节), Chongyang Festival (重阳节). Additionally, the Opinion promotes the use of overseas Chinese cultural centers, such as Confucius Institutes, cultural festival exhibitions, cultural relic exhibitions, expositions, book fairs, film festivals, sports events, tourism promotions, and various brand activities to disseminate fine Chinese traditional culture. Ultimately, the purpose is to help various representational tradition Chinese items to grasp a national stage, including Chinese medicine, Chinese culinary, Chinese martial arts, Chinese classics, Chinese cultural relics, Chinese garden, and Chinese festivals, and not necessarily to absorb foreign culture into China.

It may be speculated that the producers of *Who's the Murderer* have decided to eliminate references to Western holidays to avoid being reprimanded by NRFT. While the Opinion does not explicitly disapprove of foreign culture, it does stress the need to promote traditional Chinese culture through public education. Xi Jinping, similarly, explains “socialism with Chinese characteristics” as “being grounded in the unique cultural traditions, unique historical destinies and unique basic national conditions of China” (Meng, 2018, 185). Thus, the producers may have taken the precautionary step before being reprimanded, demonstrating the State’s continued strong hold of media contents produced and broadcasted.

4.1.2. Market Influences

Nonetheless, the power of the state is not the entire picture. According to Fiske, media messages can challenge “ideological conflicts... [by offering] audiences resources whereby they can construct meanings contrary to those aligned with the dominant ideology” (Cui & Zhang, 2017, 401). Therefore, two other factors that are at play in the Chinese media environment must be discussed: commercial interests and the will of media producers. Commercial interests will be discussed here, while the role of media producers will be elaborated in detail in the following section in relation to media content.

Reality television provides the opportunity to view society in a different light. In order to be commercially successful, media producers must also adhere to the requirements of investors and advertisers. As shown through *Who's the Murderer*, there are generally two avenues to earn revenues for online media content in China.

Due to MangoTV's affiliation with HSTV, the producers were able to invite some important players to the show including the two permanent hosts, He Jiong (何炅) and Sa Beining (撒贝宁). He is one of the most important entertainment hosts in China and has hosted the reality-variety program *Happy Camp* (快乐大本营) since 1998, this is also one of the most long-lasting programs in Chinese history, with weekly episodes to this day. *Happy Camp* was so popular that even CCTV cloned the format in the late 1990s with shows such as *Lucky52* (幸运 52) and *Happy Dictionary* (快乐词典). He also received a Guinness World Record in 2017 for having "the most followers on Weibo personal accounts (male)" at 120.46 million fans (Tencent News, 2017). Sa is a law graduate from Peking University and has hosted a legal show, *Legal Report* (今日说法), since 1998. The bringing together of the two hosts represents the bringing together of the entertainment and legal aspects of the show, aimed at bringing attention to socially important issues in an entertaining way. The promotion of the show has always been on the contents of the show and the interaction with fans, and less on gossiping celebrities' personal lives or using debatable issues to take over Weibo trending searches (*Who's the Murderer* Season 3, 2021).

First, direct sponsorship by advertisers is most definitely the top dollar earned. Throughout its six seasons, *Who's the Murderer* have been sponsored by a variety of companies, ranging from cellphone providers (Honor, Oppo), to video-sharing sites (Volcano Video, Tik Tok), to car brands (Shanghai Cadillac), snack brands (Pepsi, Oreo), to social-networking sites (Tantan, Soul). A common practice in China is to incorporate the sponsor with the name of the show. For example, *Super Girls* was known as "Mongolian Sour Yogurt *Super Girls*". Although the sponsor is not "read" with the title of the show anymore (i.e. "Oppo *Who's the Murderer*"), the logo of the sponsor is still added to the logo of the show, making the two always affiliated. Product placement is present throughout the show, where products are put on set for the players to drink or eat as they wish, such as the placing of Nestea Coffee on the dining table of the players' on-set homes. What is more interesting to note is the embedding of advertisers within

the actual storyline of the show. In S5E3 Room 233, the NPC (non-playing character, usually the victim who has been murdered) had plastic surgery and hid the only evidence, a before and after photograph, by colouring it in with black make-up. The players then used L'Oréal's Micellar Water, a make-up remover, to reveal the photo, as the solution was able to "take off everything". Similarly, in S5E8 X School Killings, one player, Jia Guaiqiao, recorded his experiences of growing up to becoming the "perfect child" in a TikTok video, which ultimately led to the discovery of his real identity. It is evident that advertiser's products are very much important to the storyline of the show, and at times, it may push the plot forward. In one episode, when discussing who is still a suspect, He made the statement, "Oppo cannot be the bad guy, Oppo is the sponsor!" Additionally, when the producers want to present a controversial topic, such as war and colonization, a pseudonym is usually used, without any reference to real locations and countries. S1E11 The Ghost in the Commander's Mansion is about a war between Mang Country (from "MangoTV") and Jia Country (pronounced as "fake" in Chinese), S3E3 Black Fairy Tale is similarly set between Mang Country and Oppo Country, while S6E6 Mystery Tribe portrays the colonization of Earth by aliens from Mang Star. When references to Mang or Oppo are made, they are usually portrayed as the "good people", or the vulnerable ones, while references to "Jia" are more related to invaders.

The second channel to earn revenues for producers is through membership fees. *Who's the Murderer* was produced and broadcasted by MangoTV, which meant audiences need to create an account with MangoTV to watch the show. However, since Season 2, regular members, who did not pay a subscription fee, had to wait to Saturdays at noon to view the newly released episode, while VIP members, who paid a subscription fee, could have early access on Friday at noon, a day earlier. VIP members also had access to the revelation of the case, which was not available to regular members. In the third and fourth seasons, the model changed again, allowing regular members to watch the revelation on Saturdays as well. This may be due to the discontentment shown by audiences as regular members also wanted to know why the murderer committed the crime. In Season 5, each episode became longer and was divided into two parts. VIP members can access both parts on Fridays, but regular members must wait until Sunday to access part 2. Then in Season 6, VIP members can access part 1 of the show on Thursdays and part 2 on Fridays, while regular members have access on Fridays and Saturdays respectively. While the membership structure did

not influence the content of the show, the producers did adapt audience reaction to the change to a case. S2E12 Closing party debates the issue of requiring audiences to pay for a subscription to access the show, presenting the issue as being proposed by the director but unwelcomed by the players as they feel it may reflect negatively among the audiences. Evidently, the producers understood the capitalist logic of the show, and were happy to turn it into an entertainment piece for the audiences.

4.2. Textual Analysis

4.2.1. Traditional Views of Reality Television

Traditional views of entertainment media tend to have a negative connotation. At the outset of reality programs, negative self-exposure in order to attain a “five-minute fame” was widespread. In different instances, negative self-exposure also helped with providing authenticity and realness to the show, through acts such as spilling ugly secrets about participants, flaunting rank egotism, and attacking personal morality and social norms (Bayles, 2018, 28). Marcus (2014) also notes that reality television includes excessive performances of “on-air personalities” (144). This can be seen through excessive emotions expressed in reality programming, including excessive crying and laughing, as well as more bodily contact than normally seen in Chinese society. In fact, one of the conditions for the return of *Happy Girls* in 2009 was that there should be no crying shown throughout the program to restrict emotional arousal, on part of the contestants, as well as within the audiences. However, not only are such emotional breakdowns or emotional expressions preferred by producers, so are so-called negative personalities. Producers are happy to see viewers react negatively to certain participants or participants’ personalities (Marcus, 2014, 147), because whether it is positive publicity or negative publicity, it is nonetheless exposure for the program. As long as such negative emotions are directed at a particular participant and not at the show itself, producers will not intervene in public discourses. One allure for the reality-variety format was that audiences were able to get a “sneak peek” at celebrities’ “real personalities” that was beyond what was presented in music videos, films, or television shows and dramas, that it was a view of celebrities in their everydayness. At the same time, reality television has a reputation of focusing on socially deviant behaviour and norms (Bignell, 2014, 102). Putting such images in focus for the mass audience is not meant to

normalize them or to encourage their acceptance in society, but rather to show that such behaviours are not desirable and may have also contributed to their marginalized status in society.

Hill (2014) found that different social, religious, and ethnic groups are encouraged to perform in different ways on television (127). This will then contribute to the established stereotypes against certain underrepresented groups, and in effect marginalize these individuals in society even more. Bignell has found that reality television programs have tended to judge participants against middle-class social norms, which will ultimately set underprivileged participants to fail (2014, 108). He goes on to state that the “reality” that is being presented is conditioned by the relative social power of participants (Bignell, 2014, 108). The focus on the middle-class is because this group is viewed to be most valuable in terms of their relative economic value. In general, the middle-class have more to spend, and therefore producers, with audiences, “reinforce the underlying ideological biases associated with middle-class lifestyles” (Wu, 2017, 173). Marcus (2014) has also found that rather than challenging existing social norms, reality television naturalizes existing social hierarchies (139). Focusing on the middle-class, reality television content may have many negative effects on the audiences and viewers. The most significant social division among the Chinese society is that between the urban and rural populations (Zhao, 2008, 76). Complicating the division are income gaps within the rural economy, ethnic and religious differences, and gender inequalities, ultimately leading to the prioritization of those with more capital. At the same time, media gatekeepers within the Chinese society, as all societies throughout the world, are typically from privileged backgrounds, distancing them “from the lower social classes, their perspectives and concerns... [and] their survival struggles” (Zhao, 2008, 92). Therefore, elite interests are presented as the general interest of society, while the majority interest has effectively been eliminated.

Who's the Murderer is no different in this sense. While it attempts to include characters from a range of different backgrounds, telling the story of different social classes, elitist tendencies can be traced. In S3E4 Late Night Spicy Pot, Wei Daxun (魏大勋) plays Xun Waimai, a take-out delivery person, who is considered to be disadvantaged in Chinese society. At the same time, he is also an ex-prisoner who was released from prison after serving time for manslaughter. While the storyline discusses

the hardships of adjusting back to society after being in prison for ten years, the difficulties of earning an income without any professional skills, and the struggles of working as a delivery person was discussed in the show, there is no critique of the systemic issues underlying society. In the same episode, Sa plays Sa Long, a constructions contractor. After completing a job, he was scammed by the construction company, leaving him with no money to pay his labourers. The tensions between wealthy construction companies and the disadvantaged migrant workers, who comprise the majority of construction workers in China's cities, is a contentious subject that is often discussed in traditional media and alternative media alike. The presentation of such social issues in the show is only at the individual, lacking a critique of the systemic injustices in place in society which may have caused such issues in the first place.

Wu (2017) found that a large number of Chinese audiences would tend to view themselves as belonging to a lower social class than they are in reality (131), leading to self-abasement, hatred towards the middle- and upper-class, and even unhealthy perceptions of society. For example, when discussing the post-1990s generation on the social media platform Tik Tok, there is a banter called "averaging a million" (人均一百万), which means that everyone makes a million yuan per year. These Tik Tok users consider themselves to be middle-class, which leads the great majority of the post-1990s generation to consider themselves "unworthy" (不配). Reality television has also contributed to the increase in social conflict, inequality, and class stratification (Hawes & Kong, 2013, 739), through the portrayal of the middle- and upper-class as the norm while neglecting the lower strata of society. Contributing to this is the fact that the terms and conditions for participation in reality programming are set from a middle-class perspective (Meng, 2018, 117). One of the reasons for the promotion of "social harmony" by Hu Jintao was due to the increasing domestic conflicts and social instabilities (Hawes & Kong, 2013, 740). As a society in general, there has been a "group mentality of resentment" towards rich or well-off individuals, characterized by anger towards corrupted officials and conscienceless rich people, leading to a lack of trust in social justice (Wu, 2017, 131). Ordinary citizens also believed that there was a lack of possibility of upwards social mobility as a result of abuse of power by the socially powerful (Wu, 2017, 131). When media representations show the well-off lives of the middle-class, it is not surprising to understand audiences' perception of being marginalized by mainstream media.

4.2.2. Infotainment

In the study of non-Western societies, the difference between public and private matters renders that politics is the most important content to be analyzed, while entertainment is only seen as diverting audience attention away from those more important issues. However, Carpini and Williams (2000) have found that the division between news and entertainment was socially constructed in the United States in the late 1990s (165). In particular, three distinctions have been made during this time: 1) news media was separated from entertainment media, with the former being responsible for the civic function, and the latter for the entertainment function; 2) fact was separated from opinion within the news, with the emphasis that news reporting should strive to be accurate, objective, and balanced; and 3) the public was separated from media professionals and policy experts, where the former is seen as easily manipulated consumers, and the latter is the gatekeepers of information (Carpini & Williams, 2000, 164). However, as stated by Schudson (1978), the idea that news should be objective and professional emerged “precisely when the impossibility of overcoming subjectivity in presenting the news was widely accepted and... precisely because subjectivity had come to be regarded as inevitability” (157, quoted in Carpini & Williams, 2000, 166).

In the new media environment, there is a blurring of the boundary between informational content and entertainment content (Bai, 2005, 2). In the case of *Who's the Murderer*, while the show does benefit from its entertainment values, it also has a wider social responsibility role. In S1E7 Please Answer 1998, He Jiong and Sa Beining engaged in a brief discussion about the goals of the show, which outlines this perfectly. Sa, being the real murderer for the case, turned himself in at the final voting. When he was in the cage representing prison, he states:

The murderer leaving with six gold bars is only a setup of the game, but what we really want is to catch the real murderer, using our intelligence, using our evidence and abilities. But sometimes, the murderer will leave with the gold. In the game, the murderer has won, but in real life, this is a devastating thing. So today, when I still have the chance, I realized salvation can occur in a game.

Sa is the only murderer within the six seasons of the show who surrendered and voted for himself, and as a result, went behind bars. Being the first time that Sa played the role of the murderer, he wanted to demonstrate the purpose of the show through his

own actions. While it is true that he committed the murder to protect his girlfriend who was suffering from domestic abuse, he shared that what he did is ultimately wrong. As a law graduate, he shares that crime can only be wrong, regardless of the reason.

He replies:

Since the first day, he (Sa) has been worried about one thing. That is, what is our show trying to promote? When we reflect back onto real life, are we telling audiences justice has long arms? Or are we telling audiences you get what you deserve? Or are we telling audiences as long as you are smart enough you may have the chance to escape from justice? He has struggled with this idea since the first day.

The producers and the players on the show understand that the show can provide certain social values for its audiences. The show is not only produced for its entertainment value, but rather there is a deeper meaning attached to it. From He's quote, it can be seen that the players have thought about the purpose of the show themselves. By framing that purpose in the form of a series of questions, audiences are invited to arrive at their own conclusions. The producers hope that through the different themes presented in the show and through the acting out of different characters, players can bring more positive energy to the audience leading to a more positive outlook on life and society in general (Who's the Murderer Season 1, 2021).

Since Season 3, the players have been invited to talk briefly at the end of the show, sometimes given prompt questions to answers, and other times to simply speak freely on the issue presented in the episode. For example, in S3E8 Carefree Inn, the major topic was smile depression, which is a type of depression where the individual would act very warm and friendly in public but suffer when they are alone. As such, it is much harder to discover and diagnose since even the friends and family members of the patient may have never seen the individual experiencing pain and misery. The players then gave advice to those who may be dealing with depression to reach out, to ask for help, to not find it shameful, to try to become happier. But they also mentioned the need for friends and family to show empathy and for society to be friendlier to those suffering from mental illnesses. In a similar episode, Season 6 Episode 5 Forgetting Grocery Store, Sa also said: "we will never make fun of a cancer patient, so we should not make fun of a depression patient either". In Season 4, this became a formal segment of the show called "Detective Power Station (侦探能量站)". At the same time, the producers

also invited different professionals or experts to speak on such issues, such as My Therapist, a psychology counselling APP, CEO Jian Lili, Xiangtan City The People's Procuratorate Deputy Chief Prosecutor Zhong Yin, and China University of Political Science and Law School of Criminal Justice Associate Professor Fang Peng, to name a few.

Appendix B outlines some of the themes that are presented through *Who's the Murderer*. Some themes discuss a particular social issue, such as cyber violence (S2E5 See You Friday), the role of AI (S2E6 2046), school violence (S3E1 Nightmare Hotel 1), environmental degradation (S3E6 Doomsday Bees), recycling (S5E5 Crime on the Rooftop), domestic violence (S5E11 Murder on the Northern Train I), and pedophilia (S6E2 Midnight Hotel II). In these episodes, a problematic issue that has occurred in society is being put on the show to grab audience attention, to spotlight issues that may be ignored in traditional media, or to simply make audiences aware of such issues. Focusing on the pedophilia example, Beijing Adolescent Legal aid and Research Center director, Tong Lihua, shared some staggering numbers at the end of the episode. He stated that in 2017, there were 47,600 pedophilia cases in China, which grew to 50,700 in 2018, then to more than 60,000 in 2019. He also makes it clear that these are just the reported cases, with many others not even known to authorities. Pedophilia is somewhat of a taboo topic in mainstream Chinese media, and many stories do not enter the public eye unless it is horrendous enough, such as the 2014 case in Guangzhou where the little girl was sexually assaulted by her neighbour every weekend for three years and her parents did not know about it, or the 2020 Heilongjiang case where the five-year-old girl was raped and tortured permanently disabling her for the rest of her life. Even in news coverage of such events, the issue is danced around, where the former cases focus on the ignorance of the girl's parents, and the latter focusing on portraying the pedophile as a societal scumbag. The issues are presented as problematic, as something that should be discussed in society. The fact that children should learn to protect themselves, the experiences of the victim, and the need for sex education are often ignored. Nonetheless, in the episodes discussing such social issues, there is some form of conclusion reached. For example, in S2E6 2046, the three principles of AI are given: 1) AI must not hurt humans and must not stand by and watch humans suffer; 2) AI must follow all commands made by humans, but not violate Principle 1; and 3) AI must protect itself, but not violate Principles 1 and 2.

Other issues are presented as more of a discussion, such as in times of disaster, do victims have a duty to rescue others (S2E11 Crazy Circus); whether humans are the “superior specie” that can decide the fait of other species (S3E9 Werewolf Prequel); do individuals have the right to punish those who cannot be punished by the law (S3E12 Beautiful to Blame Again II); what happens if laws did not exist anymore, such as in a dream (S4E2 Island Escape II); what is the meaning of idols and what are their roles in society (S4E4 NZND: Back to Before Popularization); the ethics of DNA research in creating the “perfect child” (S5E8 X School Killings); what is “love” and what does it mean to harm another “out of love” (S5E10 Detective Chinatown); what is “happiness” and what does it mean to achieve “happiness” (S6E5 Forgetting Grocery Store); and whether there exists a hierarchy between civilizations based on their development and whether there exists a hierarchy between humans based on their intelligence (S6E6 Mystery Tribe). There is not necessarily a “right” or “wrong” answer, but rather depends on the audiences’ perceptions and positionalities. One issue often discussed in society is that of the relationship between parents and their children. Some may believe that children are the “possession” of the parents, and must adhere to everything said by the parents. Others may believe that a child is him or herself first and foremost, and parents are only the means by which they come to the world and, thus, cannot control the child. This is a contested subject and while one side may have more support in contemporary society, there is no actual “right” perspective.

4.3. Audience Reception

4.3.1. Negative Influence of Reality Television

Scholars have noted the negative influences reality television may have on its audiences. On the one hand, there has been expressed concern in terms of the underlying purpose of reality television in terms of what it is trying to achieve. Neil Postman claimed that “modern audiences are slowly but surely destroying a democratic and intelligent society with visual entertainment” (Wu, 2017, 7). He believes that entertainment has no value for civic engagement but only diverts audiences’ attention away from more important information, and that it “may compromise [their] judgment and weaken [their] resistance to tyranny (Huang, 2014, 146).

Hill (2014) suggests reality television has three ways of blurring the lines between lived realities and presented realities. First, reality shows sell experiences to consumers and audiences and such experiences are connected to interaction and emotional engagement factors (Hill, 2014, 117). Because reality television claims to be “real” and “authentic”, audiences may take expressed emotions at face value, forgetting that emotions are regularly dramatized in reality shows. Audiences sometimes invest too much emotional labour into experiencing reality television. Supporting this point, I have found in my research that 562 posts (28.41%) discussed crying or showing some kind of emotional response as a result of watching the show. Second, reality shows tend to over-stimulate the senses and create “Actuality Plus” (Hill, 2014, 117). Related to the first point, expressions are so dramatized on television that sometimes they may become distorted in translation. For example, in the matchmaking reality show, *If You Are the One* (非诚勿扰), obsession with materiality is often emphasized in early seasons. This has then translated into society, by emphasizing to women looking for love or marriage, that material possession should be the most important aspect. However, the participants themselves may not hold such values so strongly, but rather the message was expanded through the editing and production process to generate viewership and discussion. Lastly, audiences are invited to participate in the reality television experience through live events, audience voting, and interactions through different social media and online platforms (Hill, 2014, 117). Whether it is through mobile voting in the early years of *Super Girls*, or in online discussion forums dedicated to any and all broadcast program, the point is to get audiences participating in the “reality television experience”. In the current time, as soon as a program is approved by the state to start casting, the producers will immediately create a “discussion thread” (话题) on Weibo. Audiences are now encouraged to participate in the reality show even before the actual participants. All three aspects in combination create a version of reality for audiences that is different from both lived experiences and reality television shows, but are nonetheless negatively influencing audiences. As argued by Wu (2017), audiences are “[falling] prey to the media’s mind-numbing effects and willingly or unknowingly [disconnecting] themselves from politics” (11).

Due to the nature of the show, *Who’s the Murderer*, in that it is meant to have a social responsibility role, to educate audiences are sensitive topics, blurring the boundaries between “reality as presented in media contents” and “reality in society” may

be beneficial. That is through the former, audiences are able to reflect on the latter. If audiences left the show believing that what happened in the show is only a setup of the show, that any horrendous action in the show does not and will not exist in society, then the show will have limited value. One post on Weibo states:

Weibozongyi: The topic is very meaningful, in this week's story, Rong Mentong was assaulted when she was little, thus developing childhood trauma. But turning the focus to the entire society, pedophilia is one of the serious social problems, deserving public attention, having more people care about these children, *Who's the Murderer* has put thought into it

The post recognizes that Rong was hurt in the show, but that the issue still deserves wider attention in real society. From this, it can be seen that there is a clear distinction made between what has occurred on the show and what is happening in society, however, the hope is that society will learn from the show. On the other hand, the producers of the show are very careful in creating a distinction through the captions presented in the show. Any references to “death” (死), “murderer” (凶手), “kill” (杀), have all been marked with quotation marks. This is to show that while such acts are necessary for the storyline of the show, they should not be replicated in reality.

The other side of the moral concerns of reality television has to do with the psychological influences on audiences. The government is anxious that popular culture may have detrimental effects on the massive audience (Keane, 2002, 84), and uses this as one of the justifications for increased guidance and policy. From the audiences' perspective, they may project their own senses and emotions when watching reality programming (Wu, 2017, 158). If audiences see a social discrepancy between what is being promoted in reality television, that is more opportunities for success, happiness, and upward social mobility, and the lived realities of injustices and hopelessness (Wu, 2017, 159), the effects on morale and the psychological well-being of individuals may be substantial. As a result of such moral concerns, the state has effectively decided to tighten media regulations even more. It is believed that reality television should “serve to reinforce correct social values and provide cultural enlightenment for their audience” (Wu, 2017, 189). One important value promoted by reality programs such as the *Voice of China* (中国好声音) and *Chinese Dream Show* (中国梦想秀) is that of “quality” (素质) (Meng, 2018, 112). Often, the blame is put on the media industry for failing to fulfill their social responsibility roles of ideological guidance for the audiences (Wu, 2017, 226), for decreasing the “quality” of audiences by promoting the vulgar.

4.3.2. Active Audience Participation

Meng (2018) suggests that reality television can be educational, as its many subgenres can offer “informal guidelines for living” (110). For example, *Chinese Poetry Congress* (中国诗词大会) brings Chinese traditional poetry into the public’s eyes; *The Brain* (最强大脑) promoting the importance of knowledge and the science of the brain; and *Voice Monster* (我是特优声) bringing people working behind the scenes to center stage. Even though there have been widespread concerns regarding reality television production, and television in general, there are alternative perspectives that are deemed to be more hopeful. Wu (2017) discusses the cultural citizenship perspective as challenging traditional views about entertainment media and politics (11). In this perspective, reality television is seen to give certain rights and opportunities to the people to have their voices heard (Viviani, 112). It proposes that scholars should expand their definition of what constitutes politics and civic engagement. Media audiences are not seen as passive, uncritical, and isolated, but as suggested by Jenkins to be actively engaging with media texts (Wu, 2017, 11). In this sense, when audiences are discussing reality television programs or other entertainment programs, they can also be engaging in political discourses.

Participation in reality television can be seen as a form of “mass sociability”, where audiences connect with each other to form deeper associations and further challenge deep-seated values (Wu, 2017, 200). Jacobs (2007) discussed mass culture as “an agent of mass sociality”, while Alexander (2006) find that media contents can facilitate audience understanding of social events by organizing them around civil binaries (Wu, 2011, 49). Marcus (2014) puts forward the idea that the spread of communication technology will allow people to portray issues and events in their own lives without being mediated by corporate interests (136). Carpini and Williams (2000) found that in the hyperreal world, facts presented through entertainment media may induce discussions of more deep-seated, foundational issues about the human condition (171). Audiences regularly use social media platforms to challenge, or further the discussions of, the dominant discourses presented through mainstream media. Entertainment content has the ability to help audiences connect their viewing experience with discussions about common concerns, serious social issues, and public policy in a more powerful manner (Wu, 2011, 49)

In *Who's The Murderer*, episodes that focused on issues of school violence and bullying have encouraged audiences to share their own experiences and stories on Weibo. This has, in effect, led to the public discourse that the victims are not the ones to be blamed, that more attention should be paid to such conflicts, and that there is no shame in admitting or confessing that one has been the target of such brutalities. While not many, there are 11 posts where the audience shared their own experiences with pedophilia or sexual harassment. Some may have a few sentences to explain their story, others merely state that "sometimes one could be wearing baggy school uniforms" in response to the common presumption that the victim is asking for it through their outfits. Some scholars believe that audiences have the ability to interpret media texts and engage in media experiences that will further their civic life (Wu, 2017, 216), and that they are not simply somehow mesmerized by media messages as suggested by, for example, the hypodermic needle model. Alexander also claims that media content will facilitate audiences' understanding and characterization of social events that are happening in their daily lives (Wu, 2017, 16). Audiences are encouraged to engage with media content actively, to read messages closely, to discover so-called "hidden meanings", and to reach their own conclusions. Public discussions on issues presented in reality television is more than just ranting on part of the audiences, but rather acts as a way for audiences to gather their thoughts and discuss differing perspectives in a socially responsible manner (Wu, 2017, 143).

It should also be noted that not all audiences want to be emotionally aroused by reality programming, believing that such shows should simply provide entertainment. One comment, which also happens to be the only comment exhibiting this line of thinking in my research, states:

Nulidethinking: can the show not have such sensational topics, its really not very interesting, before when television had it, I already did not like it, miss the only happy comedic Who's the Murderer

Thus, there are also audiences who want entertainment media to do just that, entertain, and not be sensitive to social issues.

I will conclude this section by sharing four themes I have found in my analysis of the Weibo posts. Most audience discussions were more focused on discussing the particulars of the show, such as quoting from the on-screen captions, or reiterating what

was said by the players. However, there are still others who have related the show to other social issues. While such themes were not significant statistically, they do shed light on the audience's abilities to internalize media messages presented in the show, and making connections to other cultural productions or social events. First, 88 posts referred to an online novel *The Light in the Night* (默读), where pedophilia was a case in the book. A number of posts referred to a line said by the protagonist, Luo Wenzhou: “you can teach kids to be cautious of strangers, to be alert, but you cannot tell them to be scared of flower-print dresses, or else what are we for?” *The Light in the Night* is a genre of books popular in China, called “yuandan” (原耽), which focuses on the LGBTQ community. Because homosexuality is neither encouraged nor discouraged officially in Chinese society, but homosexual marriage is not allowed legally, mainstream media have rarely discussed this topic. Thus, as an alternative media format, online reality-variety programs, *Who's the Murderer*, sheds light on another alternative media format, yuandan. Second, 7 posts referred to the Cho Doo-Soon Case, which was a real pedophilia case that occurred in South Korea in 2008. The pedophile, Cho Doo-Soon was released from prison around the time this episode was released, after serving only 12 years in prison, which is the highest penalty in South Korea. Audiences discussed the irony of the justice legal system as the little was permanently disabled from the crime, while the perpetrator walks freely in such a short time.

Third, 19 posts referred to *Burdened with One Hundred Thousand Pounds Growing Up* (负重一万斤长大), which is a song written by Chinese singer Tai Yi based on the Cho Doo-Soon case. Within these posts, many referred to a line from the song, “dresses dance lightly and lonely, beautiful isn't her fault” (裙子又轻舞落寞 美丽又不是她错), which questions the common perception that the victim is the one to be blamed. Lastly, 5 posts referred to *Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise* (房思琪的初恋乐园), a novel written by Chinese-Taiwanese writer Li Yihan, based on her own experiences of being sexually assaulted by a tutoring institution's teacher in her second year of high school. The author committed suicide when she was only 26 years old, after suffering depression for many years. From these examples, it is evident that viewers, albeit a small portion of audiences, are able to relate media messages they have seen on the show to other media and content productions, as well as real social issues.

Chapter 5.

Conclusion

Meng argues that there has been a neglect in research on non-Western entertainment media. Western academics assume that the Chinese Party-state dictates every aspect of Chinese life, neglecting the role of the market and the will of producers. Since the 1970s, China has engaged in a series of economic reforms, leading to the commercialization of the media industry. This has led to a boom in entertainment media in order to attract audience attention and advertising revenue. I have demonstrated in my research that *Who's the Murderer* not only uses product placement tactics, but also embeds different products into the actual storyline, pushing forward the narrative within the show. While there tends to be a distinction between informational content and entertainment content in research, Carpini and Williams (2000) have stated that this distinction was made artificially. In the case of *Who's the Murderer*, entertaining audiences is definitely a priority of the show, but it is not the only objective. Through the different themes discussed throughout the episodes, a variety of socially important issues have been discussed. At the same time, the producers hope to provide some educational role, as well as to promote an optimistic outlook on life amongst its audiences. Lastly, while foreign influence in the Chinese mediascape has been prominent since the early days, it is not enough to only examine audience reception to foreign content or foreign ideology. By focusing on Weibo posts, I have shown the ability to Chinese audiences to relate media messages to other cultural productions within the Chinese mediascape, as well as to other social issues. Thus, audiences should not be seen as merely accepting media messages at face value but are indeed able to make wider connections.

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Appendix A.

Media Sources for Each Episode

Episode	Relevant Sources	Format	Originating Country
S1E3 The Battle of the Boy Band	He is Beautiful	TV drama (2009)	South Korea
S1E4 Mermaid's Tears	The Little Mermaid by Hans Christian Andersen	Fairy tale (1837)	Denmark
S1E8 Beautiful's Fault	Case Closed: Shinichi's Identity and Lan's Tears by Aoyama Gosho	Comic/Anime (2009)	Japanese
S1E9 The Final Battle of UEFA Champions League	UEFA Champions League	n/a	n/a
S1E10 League of No Legends	Marvel Comics	Comic/Film	U.S.
S1E10 Destiny Cruise	Titanic	Film (1994)	U.S.
S2E1 The Princess's Marriage	Nirvana in Fire	Book (2006)/TV drama (2015)	China
	Legend of Fuyao	Book(2011)/TV drama (2018)	China
S2E2 Legend of Chinatown	Detective Chinatown	Film (2015)	China
	The Grandmaster	Film (2013)	China
S2E2 Midnight Express	Murder on the Orient Express by Agatha Christie	Book (1934)/Film (2017)	England
S2E4 Night at the Museum	The Lost Tomb by Nanpaisanshu	Book (2007)/Film (2016)	China
	Ghost Blows Out the Night by Tianxiabachang	Book (2007)/Film (2016)	China
S2E5 See You Friday	"Cyber-violence" online discussion	Online discussions	China
S2E6 2046	Westworld	TV drama (2016)	U.S.
	Real Humans	TV drama (2015)	U.S. and England
S2E7 The Horror of Nursery Rhymes I	Identity	Film (2003)	U.S.
	And Then There were None by Agatha Christie	Book (1939)	England
	The Minds of Billy Milligan by Daniel Keyes	Book (1981)	U.S.
S2E8 The Horror of Nursery Rhymes II	Identity	Film (2003)	U.S.
	And Then There were None by Agatha Christie	Book (1939)	England

	The Minds of Billy Milligan by Daniel Keyes	Book (1981)	U.S.
S2E9 Desperate Housewife	Gone Girl	Film (2014)	U.S.
S2E10 Drunken Flower Field	The Mystic Nine	TV drama (2016)	China
S3E2 Nightmare Hotel II	The Skeleton Key	Film (2005)	U.S.
S3E4 Late Night Spicy Pot	Case Closed: Idol Secrete Room Case by Aoyama Gosho	Comic/Anime (1994)	Japan
	Midnight Diner	Film (2014)	China
S3E5 NZND: Relentless Times	Case Closed: Betrayal Stage by Aoyama Gosho	Comic/Anime (2017)	Japan
	He is Beautiful	TV drama (2009)	South Korea
S3E6 Doomsday Bees	The Shawshank	Book (1982)	U.S.
	Redemption by Stephen King	TV Drama (1994)	U.S.
	Malice by Keigo Higashino	Book (1996)	Japan
S3E7 Can't Rush Up the Clouds Again	Case Closed: 15 Minutes Silence by Aoyama Gosho	Comic/Film (2011)	Japan
	Happy Death Day	Film (2017)	U.S.
	Groundhog Day	Film (1993)	U.S.
	The Butterfly Effect	Film (2004)	U.S.
S3E8 Carefree Inn	Saw Series	Film (2004-2021)	U.S.
	"Blue Whale"	Death game (2016)	Russia
S3E9 Werewolf Prequel	Werewolves of Miller's Hollow	Game	China
	Twilight	Movie (2008)	U.S.
S3E10 Kunlun Dream	Monster Hunter	Film (2015/2018)	China
	Eternal Love	TV drama (2017)	China
	Noble Aspirations	TV drama (2018)	China
	Chinese Paladin	TV drama (2005)	China
	The Journey of Flower	Tv drama (2015)	China
	Swords of Legends	TV drama (2015)	China
S3E11 Beautiful's Fault Again I	Detective School Q by Seimaru Amagi	Comic (2001-2005)	Japan
S3E12 Beautiful's Fault Again II	The Truman Show	TV drama (1998)	U.S.
	Black Mirror	TV drama (2011)	U.S.
S4E1 Island Escape I	And Then There were None by Agatha Christie	Book (1939)	England
	Untraceable	Film (2008)	U.S.
S4E2 Island Escape II	Inception	Film (2010)	U.S.
	The Truman Show	TV drama (1998)	U.S.

S4E3 Mysterious Call	Ikigami: The Ultimate Limit by Motoro Mase	Comic (2008)	Japan
	The Miracles of the Namiya General Store	Film (2017)	Japan
	Signal	Film (2016)	South Korea
	Inference Notes	Film (2017)	China
S4E4 NZND: Back to Before Popularization	Idol Producer	Reality Show (2018)	China
	Produce 101 China	Reality Show (2018)	China
	He is Beautiful	TV drama (2009)	South Korea
S4E5 Heaven Apartment	Hide and Seek	Film (2016)	China
	The Tenants Downstairs	TV drama (2016)	Taiwan China
	The Other	Film (2001)	U.S. and Spain
	W	TV drama (2016)	South Korea
S4E6 Want to Date	The Tao of Steve	Film (2000)	U.S.
	Queen of the Ring	TV drama (2017)	South Korea
S4E7 The Secret of the Magic School	Harry Potter Series	Film (2001-2011)	U.S.
S4E8 Flaming Rose	Phantom of the Theatre	Film (2016)	China
	Coherence	Film (2013)	U.S. and England
	Your Name	Film (2016)	Japan
S4E9 Home with Kids	Home with Kids	TV drama (2005)	China
	The Confidence Man JP	TV drama (2018)	Japan
S4E10 Wonder Park	Wonder Park	Film (2019)	U.S.
S4E11 Ready Player One	Ready Player One	Film (2018)	U.S.
	Die Now	Film (2017)	China
	Friend Game by Yamaguchi Mikoto	Comic (2014)	Japan
S5E1 Piano Land I	Triangle	Film (2009)	England and Australia
	The Legend of 1900	Film (1998)	Italy
S5E2 Piano Land II	Triangle	Film (2009)	England and Australia
	The Legend of 1900	Film (1998)	Italy
	Inception	Film (2010)	U.S.
S5E3 Room 233	Under the Bed	Film (2011)	China
	After School by Keigo Higashino	Book (1985)	Japan
S5E4 Pansi Restaurant	A Chinese Odyssey: Pandora's Box	Film (1995)	China
	Happy Death Day	Film (2017)	U.S.
	Groundhog Day	Film (1993)	U.S.
S5E5 Crime on the Rooftop	Journey Under the Midnight Sun by Keigo Higashino	Book (1999)	Japan

	Case Closed: Locked Bathroom Case by Aoyama Goshō	Comic/Anime (1998)	Japan
S5E6 NZND: Reborn Concert	He is Beautiful	TV drama (2009)	South Korea
S5E7 MGQ Magazine	Case Closed: Black Dress Alibi by Aoyama Goshō	Comic/Anime (2010)	Japan
S5E8 X School Killings	Future Cops	Film (1993)	Hong Kong China
	Tales of the Unusual 2012 Spring Special	Film (2012)	Japan
	Alex Rider: Point Blanc	Anthony Horowitz (2001)	U.K.
	The Island	Film (2005)	U.S.
	On Children by Kahlil Gibran	Poem (1928)	Lebanon
S5E9 Puppeteer's Revenge	Case Closed: Coffee's Motive by Aoyama Goshō	Comic/Anime (2008)	Japan
S5E10 Detective Chinatown	Detective Chinatown	Film (2015-2020)	China
S5E11 Murder on the Northern Train I	Murder on the Orient Express by Agatha Christie	Book (1934)/Film (2017)	England/U.S.
	The Butterfly Effect	Film (2004)	U.S.
S5E12 Murder on the Northern Train II	Murder on the Orient Express by Agatha Christie	Book (1934)/Film (2017)	England/U.S.
	The Butterfly Effect	Film (2004)	U.S.
S6E2 Midnight Hotel II	RYB Case	Real Case (2017)	China
S6E3 Four Talents	The Legendary Four Aces	TV drama (2000)	Hong Kong China
S6E5 Forgetting Grocery Store	The Miracles of the Namiya General Store	Film (2017)	Japan
S6E6 Hollywood Story	Hollywood	n/a	U.S.

Appendix B.

Themes by Episode

Episode	Themes
S1E1 The Fall of the Online Celebrity	Sugar Daddy Intellectual Property Rights
S1E2 Can't Rush Up the Clouds	Rape Abortion
S1E3 The Battle of the Boy Band	Plagiarism Plastic Surgery Unequal Celebrity Contracts Becoming a celebrity
S1E4 Mermaid's Tears	Real Estate Development Protecting a faith
S1E5 Disappeared Groom	Tax scam Undercover police
S1E6 Crazy Tulips	Drug dependency
S1E7 Please Answer 1998	Domestic violence Justice
S1E8 Beautiful's Fault	Plastic surgery Medical negligence Swapping lives
S1E9 The Final Battle of the UEFA Champions League	Soccer gambling The power of idols
S1E10 League of no Legends	Intellectual property rights Buying others' dreams
S1E11 The Ghost in the Commander's Mansion	War Betraying one's country
S1E12 Destiny Cruise	Insurance fraud Protecting one's family or other innocent people
S2E1 The Princess's Marriage	War Alliance by marriage
S2E2 Legend of Chinatown	Morale Family's duties
S2E3 Midnight Express	Revenge Paying for one's actions
S2E4 Night at the Museum	Grave digging Reincarnation
S2E5 See You Friday	Cyber-violence Internet trolls Survival in the entertainment circle

S2E6 2046	AI taking over the world Role of AI
S2E7 The Horror of Nursery Rhymes I	Inheritance rights
S2E8 The Horror of Nursery Rhymes II	Schizophrenia Orphanage
S2E9 Desperate Housewife	Death game Insurance fraud
S2E10 Drunken Flower Field	Alliance by marriage
S2E11 Crazy Circus	Duty to rescue during times of disaster
S2E12 Closing Party	Capital control of show
S3E1 Nightmare Hotel I	School violence
S3E2 Nightmare Hotel II	Victim's revenge Immorality through scientific means
S3E3 Black Fairy Tale	Fairy tales' messages
S3E4 Late Night Spicy Pot	Paying for what one has done wrong
S3E5 NZND: Relentless Times	Survival in the entertainment circle
S3E6 Doomsday Bees	Environmental degradation No one can escape on Doomsday
S3E7 Can's Reach Up the Clouds Again	The butterfly effect Everyone doing one small thing wrong leading to a disaster
S3E8 Carefree Inn	Smile depression
S3E9 Werewolf Prequel	Human's relationships to other species Humans as the "superior specie"
S3E10 Kunlun Dream	Justice Gaming addiction
S3E11 Beautiful's Fault Again I	Medical negligence Cyber-violence Plastic surgery Pyramid selling scam Domestic violence
S3E12 Beautiful's Fault Again II	Punishing those who cannot be punished by the law
S4E1 Island Escape I	Cyber-violence What is justice
S4E2 Island Escape II	What if law does not exist
S4E3 Mysterious Call	Equality of life
S4E4 NZND: Back to Before Popularization	The meaning of idols
S4E5 Heaven Hotel	"unhealthy" ways of living Borrowing money to buy luxuries Parents' control of children Using comics as an escape Insurance fraud Pretending to be something one's not

S4E6 Want to Date	Pickup Artist (PUA) Internal beauty vs. external beauty
S4E7 The Secret of the Magic School	Equality of life
S4E8 Flaming Rose	Life-changing decisions Parallel universe
S4E9 Home with Kids	Fraud
S4E10 Wonder Park	Public consciousness
S4E11 Ready Player One I	Bullying Domestic violence
S5E1 Piano Land I	Family misunderstandings Need to communicate
S5E2 Piano Land II	Family misunderstandings Need to communicate Letting go of the past
S5E3 Room 233	Nude loan Online information safety Hacking
S5E4 Pansi Restaurant	There is no "if" in life Who you hurt may turn out to be how you want to save in the end
S5E5 Crime on the Rooftop	Recycling
S5E6 NZND: Reborn Concert	Character setting What you see may not be the truth Allow oneself to be imperfect
S5E7 MGQ Magazine's Murder Case	Workplace violence
S5E8 X School Killings	The perfect child Customize DNA
S5E9 Puppeteer's Revenge	Prejudice Mob mentality
S5E10 Detective Chinatown	What is "love" Love causing hate
S5E11 Murder on the Northern Train I	Domestic violence
S5E12 Murder on the Northern Train II	Domestic violence The butterfly effect
S6E1 Midnight Hotel I	Importance of communication
S6E2 Midnight Hotel II	Pedophilia
S6E3 Four Talents	Hard work is the only way to success There is no shortcut to success
S6E4 Sky Apartment	Home vs. house Sky-high real estate prices Unethical real estate developers
S6E5 Forgetting Grocery Store	What is "happiness" If you cannot sympathize, at least empathize
S6E6 Mystery Tribe	Is there a hierarchy between civilizations

	Should humans divided into classes by their intelligence Problems with patriarchy through matriarchal example
S6E7 Hollywood Story	There is no shortcut to success Survival in the entertainment circle
S6E8 Sad Offer	Unlawful and unethical ways to achieve success
S6E9 Still Beautiful to Blame	Selling appearance anxiety Dangers of internet loans Developing correct value systems
S6E10 NZND: Dingniu Concert	The perfect idol No bottom line in chasing idols “idols are stars, but you are your own sun”
S6E11 Mang City I	War always involves innocent people Peace comes at a price paid by our ancestors Reflect on wars, cherish the peace
S6E12 Mang City II	Using violence against violence is not the answer

Appendix C.

Themes for Weibo Posts with the Hashtag #明星大侦探 (Who's the Murderer) Following the Release of Season 6 Episode 2 Midnight Hotel II on December 31st, 2020

Themes	Original Post	Response to Official Posts by @明星大侦探官微 (@Who's the Murderer Official Account)	Total	Percentage of Total
Cried	194	368	562	28.41%
Discuss the episode (related to the theme)	192	251	443	22.40%
Discuss players	103	272	375	18.96%
Discuss pedophilia/sexual harassment	175	153	328	16.58%
Good topic	166	128	294	15.86%
Praising the show	117	143	260	13.14%
Praise players	53	151	204	10.31%
"forever the god"	91	95	186	9.40%
Hope for a better future	96	78	174	8.80%
Discuss the episode (in relation to something a player did)	20	122	142	7.18%
Reference to <i>The Light in the Night</i> (默读)	52	36	88	4.45%
Discuss format of the show	6	69	75	3.79%
Laughed	20	40	60	3.03%
Show carries social responsibility	19	11	33	1.52%
Good logical flow	7	12	19	0.96%
Refer to "Burdened with one hundred thousand pounds growing up" (负重一万斤长大)	11	8	19	0.96%

Share personal experience	2	9	11	0.57%
Make suggestions to show	0	10	10	0.51%
Do not like changes made to show	1	7	8	0.40%
Refer to Cho Doo-soon case	5	2	7	0.35%
Ask others to watch show	3	3	6	0.30%
Discuss other social problems	4	2	6	0.30%
Refer to <i>Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise</i> (房思琪的初恋乐园)	2	3	5	0.25%
Discuss politics	1	1	2	0.10%
Previous seasons are better	1	0	1	0.10%
Do not like this episode	1	0	1	0.10%
Total posts	600	1378	1978	

Note 1. *The Light in the Night* is an online novel, which pedophilia being one case presented.

Note 2. Cho Doo-soon case is a real pedophilia case that occurred in South Korea in 2008.

Note 3. "Burden of one hundred pounds growing up" is a song written by Chinese Singer Tai Yi (太一) based on the Cho Doo-Son case

Note 4. *Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise* is a novel written by Chinese (Taiwan) writer Lin Yihan (林奕含) based on her own experiences of being sexually assaulted by a tutoring institution's teacher when she was in her second year of high school.