

The Politics of Reality Television: Struggling Over the Chinese Nation

by

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Abstract

Reality television has in recent year formed the staple diet of most entertainment channels on Chinese television. While discussions around reality television in the English-language academia is becoming richer and more varied, there remains to be a dearth of academic research and writing on Chinese reality Programming. This essay responds to this scarcity by examining the politics of Chinese reality television. By performing textual analysis on *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* (If You Are the One 2011), *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao* (China's Best Dance, 2014), *Baba Qu Na Er 2* (Where are We Going, Dad? 2) – three most popular reality television shows in China – this essay argues that Chinese reality television is a critical and complex cultural site where a vision of Chinese identity is articulated and made visible, as well as a place where the tensions and struggles of China's understanding of itself and market imperatives are contested and battled over.

Keywords: China; Reality Television; Neoliberalism; Nation; Identity

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Chapter 1. Introduction

A French expatriate in China appears on stage before 24 beautifully dressed young diasporic Chinese ladies expressing his love towards China and presents snippets of his life to capture the heart of his “dream girl”.

After performing three stunning pieces of traditional ethnic dance (Uyghur, Uzbek, Tajik), the 28 year old Uyghur dancer Gulmire Muhammed takes home the title of “China’s Most Beloved Dancer of 2014”.

Five celebrity dads and their children participate in a sports meet in an ethnic Miao camp based off in a rural village in Hunan, China, wearing track suits with the bold and glaring Chinese character “China” imprinted across the center front of the jacket.

Each of these three occasions is a segment from one of the three most popular Chinese reality television program between the periods of 2012 to 2014. Each week hundreds of millions of viewers tune into watch these shows on television or online, and the shows themselves become one of the hottest topics of discussion on Chinese social media. Produced by different Chinese provincial television stations and adapted from imported foreign formats, each of these shows focuses on a distinct theme, catering to different types of viewers. *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* (If You Are the One 2012) is a contentious dating show addressing issues concerning love entanglements of young Chinese urbanites. *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao* (China’s Best Dance 2014) is a competitive dance program searching for dance talents and showcasing China’s top dancers. *Baba Qu Na Er 2* (Where are We Going, Dad? 2) is a child-rearing program concretizing paternal love and unravelling the tensions and conflicts in trans-generational relationships. Although these shows are distinct in terms of their explicit content, format and viewers, there is one element that subtly stretches across all three programs – Chinese identity. From the French expatriates and Chinese diasporic participants on the dating show, to the ethnic dancer in the dance competition, and the fathers and their children in the parenting program, reality television operates as a

platform through which viewers visualize the people who constitute China. These shows epitomize the emerging and unique blend of nationalism and entertainment on reality television.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China declared itself to be a multi-ethnic and multi-national nation state (Gladney , 1994). Its foundational pluralism implies the impossible task of reducing China to a single identity. However in the three reality television shows discussed above, each program in its own way demonstrates what it means to be Chinese and epitomizes one aspect of the complex Chinese identity. How do we understand this phenomenon and what is the cultural significance of these television semiotics? What role does popular entertainment as exemplified by reality television serve in contemporary China's nation building project? Does reality television ameliorate China's social crisis and tensions generated from the rapidly changing social and economic conditions resulting from three decades of economic reform? What is the importance of reality television – a seemingly innocuous form of television entertainment – in stabilizing the crisis-ridden Chinese society? How does this enable the making of productive Chinese citizens and what is its relation to forming a Chinese identity? Finally, how does reality television strengthen the process of nation building and citizenship making in China?

It is also worth noting that the formats of the three shows mentioned above do not originate in China. *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* is an adaptation of the Australian dating show *Taken Out* (2009), while *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao* is based on the American franchise television *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005). As for *Baba Qu Na Er*, this program borrows its format from the South Korean reality television *Dad! Where are We Going?*(2013). Even though many contemporary Chinese reality programs are franchised or imported formats of global media products, their success requires cultural adaptations. So what are the factors enabling these imported reality programs to thrive in the Chinese regulatory and cultural context? How do we deconstruct the meaning of these culturally bounded television products?

With these questions in mind, I will analyze the competing discourses that are structured and circulated within contemporary Chinese reality television. These

discourses primarily concern themselves with the issues of individual and collective Chinese identity. By performing textual analysis on *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao* and *Baba Qu Naer 2*, I argue that Chinese reality television is a critical and complex cultural site where a vision of Chinese identity is articulated and made visible. It is a place where the tensions and struggles of China's understanding of itself and market imperatives are contested and battled over. Here, reality television illuminates an articulation of Chineseness which is embodied at the individual level through the presentation of various groups of symbolically resonant Chinese individuals, as well as at the national level by defining who can be counted in among its citizens. While these programs take on an educational agenda to teach neoliberal citizens how to maneuver through the market turbulences as well as the destructive social impacts generated by an increasingly entrenched neoliberal economic order, they also assume the important task of manifesting a Chinese urban middle class identity (Sun & Zhao, 2009) as well as a multi-ethnic and global identity . This feature of reality television is enabled through two mechanisms: addressing contemporary social and economic issues entrenched in an increasingly neoliberal order, and routinizing and normalizing the states' cultural legacies and ideological views. Far from being simply Chinese nationalist propaganda promoted and enforced by the government, I perceive reality television as a productive space that displays the various dimensions of defining Chinese characteristics, bringing the many facets of Chinese identity into being and producing authentic Chinese identity that contributes to the state's project in constructing an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983).

To begin with, I provide a historical overview tracing the factors and forces contributing to the rise and development of reality television. This offers us an industrial sketch of whence reality television sprang. With the larger economic picture as a backdrop, I then highlight the unique political economic conditions that prompted the mass production and distribution of reality programs in China, moving beyond the framework of positioning the global spread of reality television formats as another example of westernization of local culture (Hestroni, 2011) or US cultural imperialism (Sender, 2011, p. 4). Next, my discussion probes the general function of television before turning to flesh out the cultural politics of Chinese reality television programs. I do so by using *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao* and *Baba Qu Na Er* to look

at how reality televisions construct an image of Chineseness through the presentation of what Chinese identity looks like on individual and national level. Through these case studies I want to demonstrate how these shows while addressing the market needs, also carry a subtle and implicit political agenda which aims at espousing Chinese nationalism, and constructing a shared cultural imaginaries that mediate the formations of Chinese identities. The primary materials I use are videos of these shows, supplemented by other materials, including academic writings on Chinese entertainment based media from TV drama, movies to various television programmes which can be applied in the studies of reality television program as well.

To be sure, this inquiry into the most popular Chinese reality television programs is not to unearth generalizable truth about Chinese identities or the defining characteristics of Chineseness that can be extended across all fields and sectors. Rather, the purpose of this paper seeks to interrogate how the Chinese identity, depoliticized, becomes enmeshed deep into the fabric of our every day life and to inspect how such normalized visual politics circulate in the most prominent and visible places in our lives.

1.1. A Controversial Television Product

In the English-language scholarship, film and literature are the most widely researched aspects of Chinese media and arts (Zhu & Berry, 2009; Zhong, 2010). For many years, the “second renaissance” of modern Chinese literature and the new generations of Chinese filmmakers who burst onto the cultural scene during 1980s have been the center of many studies (Zhong, 2010). However, since the 1990s the media landscape has begun to evolve. According to Zhong Xueping (2010), as television and the Internet became more prevalent in China, film and literature no longer hold the central position they occupied in the 1980s. Far more Chinese people are watching television everyday than are reading novels and going to the cinema (Zhu & Berry, 2009). As a sound and image distributing device, and common household appliance, television is central to the way people learn about their world. Although the Internet may be increasingly providing citizens with news and information, television is still a key source of information, education and entertainment. Raymond Williams (1992), an

influential cultural theorist who studies television culture, contends that “watching dramatic simulations of a wide range of experiences is now an essential part of the modern cultural pattern” (p. 50). Zoe Druick and Aspa Kotsopoulos (2008) further support Williams’ argument by pointing to television’s function in informing and activating citizenship in modern society and politics. In the context of China, Zhu Ying and Chris Berry (2009) assert television now constitutes as a fundamental part of everyday life for many people.

In the early 1990s, television drama emerged as one of the major storytelling forms on Chinese television. The broadcast of CCTV’s *Kewang* (Yearnings, 1990), a fifty-one episode television drama series, illustrated the prominence of entertainment television in contemporary China’s media landscape (Zhao & Guo , 2005; Zhong, 2010). In their account of Chinese television development, Yuezhi Zhao, Zhenzhi Guo (2005) and Zhong (2010) confirm that television dramas in the early 1990s generated public awareness on a wide range of social issues and provided a forum for its audiences to engage with a range of serious debates. However around the turn of the millennium, with reality-based television becoming a worldwide phenomenon (Ouellette, 2014), television culture underwent major transformation (Murray & Ouellette, 2009). In the case of China, reality television has come to occupy a prominent position on Chinese television screens.

The introduction of reality based programming into Chinese television has provoked intensive discussion around issues concerning subjects from moral ethics and values to the legitimacy of the state, the market and democracy. First aired in 2004, Hunan TV’s *Super Girl* (Chaoji nvsheng) based off the popular *Pop Idol* format has garnered a viewership of more than 400 million, making it one of the top-rated shows in Chinese television history (Barboza, 2006). The producer of NBC News Le Li (2013) reveals that the show attracted up to nine million telephone votes from audience members for their favorite singers. The popularity of the show was associated by many people with the need for democracy in China (Jian & Liu, 2009). Some foreign media heralded the show as harbingers of democracy and freedom of expression, offering audience a platform through which they were able to voice their own opinion (Jian & Liu, 2009). More importantly, this reality program introduced Chinese to the concept of

voting for the first time. In a September issue of *The Economist* published in 2005, the article announced “Democracy Idol: A Television Show Challenges the Authorities” (2005). These voices - representing liberal media commentators – applauded the market triumph over the state. As Keane, Fung and Moran (2007) reveal scholars from the liberal democratic world often typify Chinese television producers as lacking freedom, and television content as being subjected to excessive government monitoring and intervention. On this note, Zhao (2008) further elaborates that, “[liberal democratic scholars] were eager to dramatize the political democratization implications of *Super Girls* and the undermining of CCTV’s dominant market power by a provincial Channel” (p. 147). With *Super Girl* and comparable television programs gaining tremendous market success in China, Chinese viewers were increasingly presented with a burgeoning collection of reality-based entertainment.

In face of the rapid proliferation of reality formats, a wide range of debates about the negative impacts of reality television have begun to emerge (Park & Baruh, 2010). Florian Schneider (2012) and Christopher Bodeen (2011) indicate that in the Chinese media sphere reality television has incited outrage among conservative Chinese authorities. Zhongde Liu (2006), the standing committee member of the 9th and 10th Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, in his media interviews has repeatedly condemned *Super Girl* for perpetrating improper moral value amongst Chinese youth which put them in risk. *Super Girl*, as well as other Chinese reality television shows, were condemned for their blatant display of hedonism. Critics also claimed that *Super Girl* caters to vulgar taste and low culture. On this note, Zhao (2008) indicates that many parents and educators were concerned about young girl’s obsession with androgynous role models and unrealistic expectations for over-night fame and quick money that the show sets up. She further explains,

Critical media scholars were wary of the show’s individualistic and consumerist value orientations and its cross promotions and synergetic articulation with a whole range of sponsors and industry participants as a marketing and profit-making machine. Moreover, they pointed out the conflation between democracy and the market, more specifically, between manifestations of an ‘enthusiasm for [political] democracy’ and reaffirmation of ‘depoliticized’ individual identities and cultural rituals through the consumption of the program on the part of its fans (Zhao, 2008, pp. 147-148).

As Michael Keane, Anthony Fung and Albert Moran (2007, p. 132) explain, such “hedonistic fun-seeking and gamesmanship undermine the solemn models of cultural development once espoused by the Ministry of Culture”. Subsequently in 2011, the State Administration of Radio Film and Television of China (SARFT) banned *Super Girl* and all shows that followed a comparable format (Schneider, 2012).

While reality television is subjected to heavy criticisms in China, Annette Hill (2005) observes that commentators in the west have also disparaged reality television as being valueless, vulgar, and vacuous. Critics have also consistently attacked reality television for being voyeuristic, cheap, sensational television (Hill, 2005). Typical commentary that dominates discussion of reality programming includes articles with titles such as “Danger: Reality TV can Rot Your Brain,” “TV’s Theatre of Cruelty” and “Ragbag of Cheap Thrills,” (Hill, 2005). In her analysis of reality television, Hill (2005) further notices the large number of scholars as well as media critics who hold antagonistic views towards this television genre for they believe reality television to be morally and intellectually degrading.¹

Despite receiving widespread criticisms from scholars and media commentators alike, and being labeled as “overly entertaining” (Bodeen , 2011), reality television is not going away anytime soon (Ouellette, 2014). Furthermore, reality television has come to constitute a major component of contemporary Chinese television culture (Lin, 2003). Rather than lamenting the rise of television culture, dismissing the impact of reality-based productions, and denouncing reality programming as guilty pleasure, I urge for a deeper and more critical analysis of this form of popular culture. Echoing Slavoj Zizek (1994) and Carla Freccero (1999), I maintain that popular culture, in this case reality

¹ In a UK report for the Campaign for Quality Television in 2003, reality TV was singled out by Michael Tracey of the University of Colorado as the “stuff of the vulgate,” encouraging “moral and intellectual impoverishment in contemporary life.” Robert Thompson of Syracuse University suggests that reality TV is popular “because it’s stupid and moronic.” In his book *The Shadow of a Nation*, the broadcaster Nick Clarke states that the popularity of reality TV has led to a dangerous blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, and as a result reality TV has had a negative effect on modern society. As one critic commented: “In essence, this may as well be network crack: reality TV is fast, cheap and totally addictive ... the shows [are] weapons of mass distraction ... causing us to become dumber, fatter and more disengaged from ourselves and society.”

television, needs to be treated with critical attention because often times they are categorized as low culture, unworthy of serious analysis. In demonstrating the importance of popular culture, Freccero points out,

As long as popular culture remains a degraded cultural form in the minds of liberal educators and students themselves, it will be available for use without analysis, much the way religion and morality are invoked in the U.S public culture as givens without meanings that are subject to contestations. Liberal arts education will turn itself into anachronism – as it is already being accused of doing – by focusing exclusively on forms of cultural production that are not widely shared in public culture. The domain of popular representation will pass as fact, unavailable for argument, debate and analysis, or it will become an arena of technocratic competence where the focus will be on how to manipulate or manage it, but not analyze it and interpret it. (Freccero, 1999, pp. 4-5)

Although Freccero speaks of popular culture in general, his concerns are applicable to reality television. Along this note, Zhong draws upon Wang Hui's work and provide a more contextualized insight on the importance of Chinese popular culture studies. As Zhong (2010, p. 2) stresses, "if a 'depoliticization' process characterizes the post-revolution Chinese economic reforms, the politics and tensions within this process, nevertheless, await fuller analysis and understanding." Combining Wang, Zizek and Freccero's message, this implies that the seemingly apolitical reality television as a quintessential popular culture phenomenon shaped both by market and state forces is a site manifesting complex ideological legacies and value-laden politics worthy of serious critical attention.

1.2. Reality Television Rises

The worldwide growth and visibility of reality television has indeed prompted scholars' interest to inspect reality television's transformative impact on television culture (Ouellette, 2014). In the last decade, a substantial amount of scholastic research has been devoted to the rapidly expanding field of reality television studies. The early discussions of the reality television phenomenon focused primarily on the definition and delineation of this genre (Hill, 2005). Work by Richard Kilborn (1994; 1998; 2003) is particularly useful in mapping out the critical discussions of reality television within the

documentary lineage, ideological positions of reality television pertaining to realism, authenticity and performance, as well as truth claims of factual television. Then with much confusion still revolving around its definition and characteristics, Jonathan Bignell (2005) took on the intricate task of examining and clarifying what programs fall under this television category. Recent work by scholars in reality television studies demonstrate how debate about this genre need not to be dominated by arguments about voyeur television. In their anthology *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (2004) update television scholarship by tackling the genre, industry, cultural politics and reception of reality television. While engaging with the issue of surveillance of the private individuals, the two editors also inspect the ongoing struggle resulting from the commercial embrace of reality programming between producers, participants and viewers. In their book *Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (2008), Laurie Ouellette and James Hay problematize the relationship between contemporary liberal governance and reality television. They argue that reality television supports a neoliberal ideology that emphasizes individual responsibility and privatizes social services by cultivating productive neoliberal citizens through management of personal conduct and behavior, or self-governance.

With a more macroscopic perspective, in their anthology *The Politics of Reality Television: Global Perspectives* (2011), Marwan M. Kraidy and Katherine Sender collect a selection of expert contributions which situate reality television in an international context characterized by highly mobile media, politics and publics. This vibrant scholarships on reality television echo a few of the themes examined by Ouellette, Hay (2008) and Murray (2009). However, Kraidy and Sender also propose new ways in which we think about the production of fame and celebrity from “ordinary” people, and the new spaces opened up for complex representation of gender and sexuality. Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood’s *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (2012) offers a refreshing counterpoint to dominant discourse of reality television on governmentality and performance. They use affect theory to illuminate “how relations of personhood are relayed and circulated through the specificities of reality television’s form – its immediacy and emotionality” (2012, p. 4). Wood and Skeggs (2011) also examine the class politics of reality television. They do so by rendering visible the new forms of performance labour of this genre, and by challenging the common assumption

that the participatory nature of reality television leads to recognition, democracy and value. Druick and Kotsopoulos's *Programming Reality: Perspectives on English-Canadian Television* (2008) is a particularly useful anthology dedicated to the exclusive analysis of Canadian television content that straddle between the border of fiction and reality. Combining textual analysis with that of the political economy of media communications, the essay collections in this book demystify how the imaginative work produced and disseminated by television contributes to construction of Canadian nationalism and citizenship. Finally in a similar vein, following the trend established by Druick and Kotsopoulo, Amir Hetsroni (2011) in his *Reality Television: Merging the Global and the Local* provide a set of culturally sensitive research articles categorized into three main geographical areas (North America, Europe and the Middle East). The essays Hestroni collated all bear the purpose of investigating how the global and local forces subject reality television to the process of glocalization. By placing the study of reality television in a more international context, Hetsroni offers a culturally sensitive examination and a cross-cultural view that is much needed in the existing academic discourse on reality television.

These selected examples of research in the burgeoning genre of reality television exemplifies that discussions around reality television is become richer and more varied. While many scholars continue to deliver authoritative work on the subject to expand the terrain of reality television studies, there remains a dearth of academic research and writing on Chinese reality programming. Coverage of Chinese reality television in English remains outdated, sporadic and patchy. Upon entering the key terms of "China" and "Reality Television" in *Communication and Mass Media Complete*, only 31 articles appeared in the search result for publications between the periods of 1980 to 2013. Amongst these published works, only 12 were related to Chinese reality television, with the majority focusing on the outdated *Super Girl*. As indicated in the previous section, television, which is informed by various social and cultural forces, legacies and tensions within it, is the dominant form of storytelling instrument in China. This posits us to acquire a better understanding of Chinese reality television to help demystify reality television, the seemingly familiar but minimally explored cultural product, in the Chinese context. This essay thus responds to this scarcity and to the commendable recent developments and proliferation of Chinese reality programming.

Different from the existing collections of scholastic contributions on reality television, I do not attempt to redefine the genre nor try to examine the various facets of reality television. Following Druick, Kotsopoulos and Hetsroni's trek in producing culturally sensitive literature on reality television programs, my research focuses on examining the complex mediation of reality that television performs within the Chinese context.

Chapter 2. Rise and Spread of Reality TV in China

2.1. Global Reality TV Landscape

“Reality television” is a relatively new category, yet the history of factual and unscripted entertainment showcasing ordinary people dates back to the origins of television (Ouellette, 2014). Although examples of reality television can be found throughout the history of television, Chad Raphael indicates that the mass emergence of reality programs began in the 1980s in response to the economic restructuring of U.S. television (2004). At the time, American television audience became increasingly fragmented; advertising revenues were spread among a larger pool of distributors and the dilution of advertising revenue increasingly pressured broadcasters to cut per-program production costs (Auletta, 1991). As television distribution competed for ever smaller advertising shares, program producers all faced rapid rising costs. Above the line costs such as talent, scriptwriting, music composition, and computer animation were factors driving up production costs (Raphael, 2004). With rapidly rising costs accompanied by smaller per show revenues, productions companies’ earnings have plummeted. In face of the thorny economic condition of the television industry, production companies have been prompted to seek cost-cutting strategies and to develop low-cost and easy to produce TV products. Economically, the genre satisfied the needs of the producers and distributors. In part because of their reliance on amateurs, reality-based productions are often-times more than a third less expensive to produce than comparable prime-time programming (Andrejevic, 2004). As Raphael (2004, p. 124) points out, “these programs largely did away with higher-priced stars”. Furthermore, producers have been encouraged to create programmes that can potentially move across a range of markets (Waisbord, 2004). Since prime-time reality television earns back its production costs with the first U.S. network showing, any further showing translates into pure profit (Raphael, 2004). In this sense, reality television format is an effective survival strategy for many television producers across the globe.

Keane reveals that reality television formats are a cheap option for television stations operating in undercapitalized markets (2002b). By using existing television formats, producers not only save research and development expenses, but at the same time minimize the risk associated with new program development (Keane, 2002b).

Another factor stimulating the rise of reality television is closely associated with the crisis of the record industry (Jian & Liu, 2009). Due to the pervasive illegal piracy online, music corporations have suffered severe loss of profit since the late 1990s. This has pushed record companies to seek new business models and adopt new strategies to maintain their profits. One of the solutions emerged to resolve such hardship was to collaborate across various entertainment and media industries (Ibid.). Consequently, Jian and Liu (2009) attribute the spawning and spread of reality pop-programs such as *American Idol* and *Pop Idol* as new business model taken up by the label industry. These industrial changes exerted significant impact in restructuring the contemporary television culture.

Although the economic crisis in the U.S television industry prompted the emergence of reality based television, the global spread of reality TV can not be solely explained as the result of U.S. product innovation because many European and Japanese programs predated their U.S counterpart (Raphael, 2004). Sender argues that the accelerated pace and scale of reality television formats' trans-border flow is the result of the continuous expansion of distribution networks and the consolidation of global media corporations (2011). In the discussion of the rise and spread of reality television in China, Sender suggests we move beyond the framework of positioning the popularity of reality television as another case of US cultural imperialism (Sender, 2011). Jian and Liu reinforce Sender's argument by showcasing how the emergence of reality television programs in China took place in a particular socio-economic context (2009).

2.2. The Rise of Chinese Reality Television

2.2.1. The Political Economic Factor

The death of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in 1976 and the subsequent political coup by counter-extreme-leftists forces induced the commencement of reform era in China. The tremendous political earthquakes produced ripple effects, leading to dramatic and immense restructuring of the Chinese television industry (Zhao & Guo , 2005). As China reforms and modernizes, its TV industry has moved along the path of marketization (Zhao & Guo , 2005; Fung, 2009; Shirk, 2011). Both domestic and external pressures has been diagnosed as forces catalyzing the commercialization process of Chinese media. The key domestic pressure propelling this change, as Fung indicates (2009), was “the restructuring of China’s archaic planned economy into a socialist market economy after the former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping’s symbolic tour to the comparatively capitalist China” (p. 179). Beginning in the 1980s, Chinese authorities began to loosen their monopolistic control on Chinese television industry (Fung, 2009). In specific terms, this meant that with exceptions of televisions stations in economically underdeveloped regions of China, all local and provincial television stations were subjected to a reduction if not termination of government subsidies (Hong, Lu, & Zou, 2009; Fung, 2009; Shirk, 2011). At the same time, in response to the government’s demand, Chinese television stations were forced to establish their own media business enterprises (Fung, 2009) and were compelled to find their own path by developing production capacity (Zhao & Guo , 2005). The intention of this media policy was to reduce the government’s financial burden at the same time encouraging televisions stations to generate advertising revenue (Shirk, 2011). More importantly, the state aimed to transform the television sector into a new site of economic growth, harnessing television’s lucrative economic potentials to strengthen national economy and to develop a national television structure as quickly as possible so as to boost the development of Chinese media and cultural sectors (Zhao, 2008). This major economic paradigm shift was critical in setting up the media landscape for the introduction and spread of reality television in China.

Prior to this wave of reform, inadequate production capacity under the planned economy restricted entertainment programming on Chinese television to primarily film productions by state-owned studios (Zhao & Guo , 2005). With economic reform unfolding simultaneously in the Chinese film industry, film studios became increasingly concerned with economic benefits and market competition. This anxiety has been translated into the studios' reluctance and refusal to provide free or cheap films to television stations (Ibid.). All of these economic changes steered Chinese television producers to consider new business models and reassess their modes of operation (Keane, 2002c). With the government continuing to reduce subsidies towards television industry, domestic television stations are forced to seek commercial revenue to maintain their daily operations and underwrite continued development (Luo , 2010). Private and foreign capital investments were an essential source of revenue through which Chinese television become more financially self-reliant (Zhao, 1998). The inflow of private and transnational capital has rendered audience rating and advertising revenues to become top priorities for television producers (Fung, 2009). With audience ratings being the cornerstone of advertising revenue, and advertising revenue being "the lifeblood" (Zhao & Guo , 2005, p. 528) of the Chinese television system, television stations were eager to explore new avenues to maximize profits. In the mid 1990s, the prevalent spread of foreign television formats in different regions of Asia introduced reality programming to the Chinese (Keane, Fung, & Moran, 2007). In hope of securing strong program viewership, Chinese producers borrowed a range of commercially proven popular foreign television formats (Jian & Liu, 2009). As Zhao and Guo (2005) elaborate, new programme types in China ranged "from morning-hour news magazines to investigative documentaries" (p. 528), "Japanese cartoons and drama" (p. 524), as well as reality programming (Fung, 2009). In his studies of Chinese television, Kean states that,

In a global environment of television industries confronting change from state subsidy to privatization, from mass delivery of content to customized service industry models, any content that captures audience segments without necessitating huge outlays of investment is manna from heaven. It is in the commercial environment of generating audiences to sell to advertisers that the mutation of entertainment formats is most visible. Aside from the pedagogic pull of 'how to' info-tainment formats, the banality of *Blooper* and amateur video shows, it seems that relationships, personal transformation, and wealth generation fulfil the requirements of good television programming. (Keane, 2002b, p. 82)

Therefore, Zhao (2008) asserts that private and transnational capital played a decisive and significant role in orienting Chinese television to entertainment based programming.

Another domestic factor prompting the rise of reality television in China is associated with the structural reconfiguration of Chinese television organization. The change in the television's funding system combined with the state's desire to modernize and internationalize China's media sector has driven China's television stations to adopt a new management system (Luo , 2010). This system known as "the producer system" (Hong, Lu, & Zou, 2009, p. 43), commonly used in advanced-industrialized countries in the west, marked a breakthrough in Chinese television history. In their analysis of Chinese television in the reform years, Junhao Hong, Yanmei Lu and William Zou highlight significance of the change in management style of Chinese television stations,

For decades, television production was managed by the party. Almost all the officials at all levels in television stations were appointed by the relevant party organizations. Media professionals were treated as mere operatives. They were not given authority to decide what to produce and how to produce it, but were just told by their party-appointed supervisors to produce what the party needed, in the way the party wanted. Before the adoption of the producer system, television professionals were powerless. The producer system broke with traditional practice by giving them the power to design programs, make decisions concerning program content, control the raising and spending of the money, and oversee production and program management (Hong, Lu, & Zou, 2009, p. 43).

The reconfiguration of television stations, the change in management style as well as the change in funding system has thus granted television managers more freedom in determining the orientation of Chinese television content, leading to more autonomous creation of new television programming.

In terms of external pressures, China's entry into the WTO in 2001 has been a significant moment to Chinese television. The lifting of the ban on international satellite TV channels to directly broadcast to Chinese viewers has created a highly competitive media platform for television industries, putting immense pressure on domestic television channels (Fung, 2009; Luo , 2010). The increasing influence of Western television programming on the Chinese audience stimulated a demand for better-quality local

programs. Luo (2010) reveals that Chinese audiences had gradually become dissatisfied with domestic television's channel's recycling of old programs. Under market pressure and audience rating, Chinese producers sought for innovative programming formats, such as reality programming, to survive in an increasingly competitive environment (Jian & Liu, 2009). As Fung (2009) pinpoints, "in the keenly competitive international media environment, these global cultural forms are new vehicles through which stations compete with each other" (p. 182). The result as Keane (2002a) describes, is a television industry where "as a hundred television formats bloom, a thousand television stations contend."

Therefore as shown in the discussion of this section, the political economic factors fostering the rapid growth of Chinese reality television is unique to China and different from those in the U.S. and elsewhere. While American broadcasters adopted reality television as a strategy to combat poor market conditions, Chinese broadcasting industry employed this television format in response to national economic and political reform.

2.2.2. The Neoliberal Factor

The expansive and successful spread of reality television in China and other countries alike cannot however be purely reduced to a question of industry politics and economics (Lewis, 2011). As Tania Lewis (2011) suggests, the rise of neoliberal government in the 21st century has contributed to the explosion and relative success of reality television. Similarly, Skeggs and Wood (2012) argue that the relentless discourse of self-hood and self-responsibility adds to its popularity. What do they mean by this? Neoliberalism, as Gareth Palmer (2008) explains, entails government taking place at a distance "through the measures, techniques, procedures and discourses that shape subject populations" (p. 2). It is a new orientation to government in which people prioritize their relationship to the market (Palmer, *Exposing Lifestyle Television: The Big Reveal*, 2008). Moreover, neoliberalism demands flexibility and responsibility from citizens and resort to privatized responses to social issues (Sender, 2011). At a time when the state increasingly directs social and political responsibility to individual citizen, the self governing citizens have become the cultural dominant (Lewis, 2011).

In the case of China, since Deng Xiaoping's introduction of a series of economic reforms in the 1980s, his ideological pragmatism has resulted in a burgeoning consumer culture paralleled with uneven economic growth (Sun & Zhao, 2009). Under this new economic and political regime, China developed drastic economic stratification and widespread social inequality. Therefore when Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao inherited the leadership in 2002, they aimed to build a people oriented, harmonious society to repair the social damages generated by two decades of unchecked economic growth (Sun & Zhao, 2009). As Zhao (2008a) remarks, the future direction of China's development is complicated by the contradictory forces of neoliberalism and socialism with the new leadership's commitments to deepen market oriented reform while pursuing their socialist legacies. Therefore, both Wanning Sun and Yuezhi Zhao (2009) believe what China needs at a minimum to address fundamental inequalities is "a discursive mechanism that provides quotidian guidance in a time of rapid social transformation."

Reality Television through its pedagogic and surveillance format, and through its focus on an imperative to self-work and self-engineering, provides a set of solutions enabling Chinese citizens to cope with the downsides of economic liberalization. Its instructional template for taking care of one-self motivates subject to monitor, improve, and transform themselves into functioning neoliberal subjects. Although the discussion of Sun and Zhao (2009) centers around 'jishi' documentaries,² their analysis can be borrowed to understand the popularity of reality television in China. They indicate,

"[...] reality TV style [...] belong to an emerging genre that turns private experiences into public narratives. They are human-interest stories of ordinary people making everyday decisions, of adjusting ethical and moral positions in a dramatically transformed social order. [...] [They] provide the moral compass and the practical knowledge that modern citizens need in order to survive in the market environment." (Sun & Zhao, 2009, p. 103)

² *Jishi* is a Chinese genre of television that truthfully reports or records real people and factual events – like those in current affairs and investigative reports. This TV genre differs from reality television because it is serious and non-entertainment based.

In addition, disenfranchised social groups and migrant workers in China particularly enjoy watching these television programmes because they offer valuable information to help them to maneuver through market turbulences.

By teaching individuals on how to improve everything, for instance from issues pertaining to dating, dancing and child rearing, the pedagogic formats of reality television seems to offer “the salvation of hoped-for change” (Palmer, 2011, p. 65) and provide the ability to empower individuals with the power “to invent their own life biographies” (Lewis, 2011, p. 81). Therefore, the popularity of reality television and its well-received audience reception is also undeniably associated with its educational and pedagogical dimension.

Chapter 3. Cultural Politics of Chinese Television

Given television's prevalence across the nation and its prominence in the Chinese everyday life, the questions remains: what role does television play in the processes of China's creation of an imagined community? In particular, what is the function of popular television culture defining the Chinese identity? In this section, I choose to analyze television products that are less readily associated with politics to examine how ambient political messages or ideologies are disseminated. As Chris Barker emphasizes, it is important for us to consider television "from a political and inevitably value-laden position, the ideological construction and potential consequences of television" (1997, p. 218). By examining entertainment programs, television formats with minimal political relevance, we gain insight into popular Chinese sentiments and the more subtle political discourse embedded in Chinese television products. With this discussion foregrounding the ideological and cultural dimensions of contemporary Chinese television, we will develop a better understanding of the political significance and impact of Chinese reality television.

3.1. What is Television?

In order to better understand the cultural and ideological dimension of Chinese television, it is important that we first examine the question - what is television? Television as a valuable source of information, education and entertainment, has been praised by many people as a key, if not the principal storyteller for society (Wasko, 2005). As Signorelli and Bacue explain:

Television's role in society is one of common storyteller – it is the mainstream of our popular culture. Its world shows and tells us about life – people, places, striving, power and fate. It lets us know who is good and who is bad, who wins and who loses, what works and what doesn't, and what it means to be a man or a woman. As such, television has

joined the ranks of socialization agents in our society and in the world at large (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999, p. 527).

In addition, the ability for television to transcribe and to reproduce events provide viewers access to the real world with immediacy and credibility (Bignell, 2002). As Ouellete and Murray (2004) point out, television assumes the role of connecting the viewer to the world around them, and provide them with direct access to the experience of the subjects portrayed in television. Likewise, Schneider (2012) asserts that television offers viewers a sense of simultaneity, a process that collapses the vast distances between viewers and associates their experience with total strangers. Although Benedict Anderson does not discuss explicitly about the role of television in shaping and imagining a modern state, scholars who have subsequently referenced his work believe this communal experience of watching television is critical to the imagination and construction of national identity (Mi, 2006). Furthermore, through its transmission of sounds and images, television propagates information and idea packed with values, ideals, morals and ethical standards (Wasko, 2005). In reinforcing this point, Zhong illuminates the power dynamics behind the television culture in the West. He points out,

“Indeed, the rise of the technology-aided mainstream popular culture in the West is itself a social, economic, and ideological phenomenon historically closely related to the dominance of the bourgeois class whose values, beliefs, ideals and aesthetics would be transmitted and normalized via mass media” (Zhong, 2010, pp. 4-5).

Thus by watching television, members of the community are also exposed to ideologies that influence their thoughts. As Schneider indicates, these messages are a part of broader social discourses that inform our understanding of the world (2012). He argues the contents of television “are part of communication practices that systematically construct our knowledge of reality, and consequently shape our worldview and inform our actions” (Schneider, 2012, p. 6). Following French philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault’s work, Schneider contends that we live in a world structured by knowledge, ideas of which are formulated and generated by people in our society (2012). He further suggests that opinions disseminated through the television may become preserved and naturalized overtime which in turn contributes to and reinforces dominant viewpoints of the society, forming hegemonic discourse (2012). On this note, Zhong accentuates how although there is still a general reluctance to acknowledge the

need for serious analysis and interpretation of popular culture, the Western Marxian critique of ideology has in recent years pressed for more attention in examining how the hegemony of the dominant class ideology' infiltrate popular media (2010). The reason for prompting greater attention on this issue relates to the power of discourse. As David Howarth indicates, discourses shape how people relate to themselves, establishing what behaviours are considered "normal" and "correct" and prompting people to discipline themselves and each other (2000). Discourse as a powerful mechanism thus have the potential in subtly attributing meanings to cultural artefacts, symbols and political issues (Howarth, 2000). This implies that television as a visual technology primes the viewer with a framework of meaning, normalize political messages and legitimise those who make them. In turn, as Schneider articulates, television is a highly effective mechanism that compiles various ideas and concepts into an overarching discourse of a nation (2012).

While Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse have never systematically engaged in television studies, television is an important factor in his development of a critical theory of society and his comments on contemporary social phenomena (Kellner , 2005). According to Kellner (2005), Marcuse sees television as an apparatus of manipulation and societal domination. In his words,

[...] with the control of information, with the absorption of individuals into mass communication, knowledge is administered and confined. The individual does not really know what is going on; the overpowering machine of entertainment and entertainment unites him with the others in a state of anesthesia from which all detrimental ideas tend to be excluded (Marcuse, 1955, p. 104)

Marcuse's thoughts align with those proposed by Howarth, for he also sees television as an apparatus that serves a critical role in the ideological reproductions of hegemonic discourses, and in enculturating individuals into the dominant system of needs, thought and behaviour (Kellner , 2005). With the general function of television clarified, the question remains: how does Chinese reality television create a hegemonic narrative about the Chinese nation?

3.2. Identity Construction of Chinese Individuals

China is a country with one of the worlds' largest population, this implies that the task of defining the Chinese identity is difficult to impossible. However, recent reality television productions such as *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao* and *Baba Qu Na Er* create an ambivalent televisual space within which the multifaceted and ambiguous Chinese identity is articulated and illuminated, showing us 'who is China?'

3.2.1. Young, Metropolitan and High-Achieving Urbanites

With China's rapid integration into the global capitalist system and its subsequent accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, many Chinese acquired the opportunity to explore the outside world. While the stories of some successful overseas Chinese have inspired millions who are confined to the homeland,³ the experience of other diasporic Chinese and the life in the West remains mythic. As Zeng (2008) points out, the craze for going abroad became a prevailing desire amongst domestic Chinese. Nevertheless, many of such opportunities are limited to middle class young individuals living in urban China, whereas the majority of young Chinese living in rural China are confined to more traditional ways of life. Furthermore, the recent development of satellite televisions in China has led to shows that promote urban lifestyles, capitalizing on the nation's general idolization of the Western culture, while portraying to the public a more modern image of its middle class young generation.

Jiangsu Television, a provincial television based in Nanjing, China seized this opportunity and responded with the creation of overseas special editions for their dating show *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*. The show begins with 24 single women standing on stage with a lit podium in front of each of them. The host then introduces a gentleman who is single on to the stage. Based upon first sight, the gentleman picks his "dream girl"

³ As Li Zeng observes, Chinese book markets in the 1990s-2000s featured numerous autobiographical accounts and literature by and about Chinese overseas students. *Harvard Girl: Liu Yiting* (2000) is a book describing Liu's experience studying top-tier American university. It had been on China's top bestsellers list for 16 months (Schauble, 2002), during which time it sold at least 1.5 million copies. Its wide spread popularity had made both Liu and Harvard household names amongst Chinese parents and students.

without revealing his choice to the rest of the people in the studio except for the host. After that, more information about the gentleman is revealed through three personal videos capturing snippets of his life. At any time before the end of the third video presentation, the ladies have the right to leave their podium lit to express their interest in dating the gentleman, or to turn the light off and deny him the chance for a date.

Starting in 2011, the show developed special editions to meet the needs of overseas Chinese singles while satisfying the domestic viewers' desire and curiosity about the unfamiliar and exotic West. Young Chinese ladies and gentleman from all parts of the world are invited to *Fei Cheng Wu Rao's* studio in Nanjing to embark on a love searching journey in China.⁴ While the show appears to be fulfilling its life-service mission by pairing up single overseas Chinese, it also satisfies the audience's desire to find out more about the capitalist metropolitan life in the West. As Lydia H. Liu (1998) argues, "television [is] a powerful media technology that can take the viewers almost anywhere in the world within the familiar surrounding of their home" (p. 39). In his analysis of transnational television drama, Zeng says,

"the impact of this "transnational serial" was to break down the physical boundary of the space constructed by the national serial. It created an illusion of being in two cultures at the same time" (Zeng, 2008, p. 64).

Zeng's analysis of transnational serial can be applied to the overseas edition of *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* in which the personal videos of the male participants are often used to demystify the mythic west. For instance in the June 24, 2012 French special edition episode, in the video that features a bachelor discussing his love history, we see a scene in which the gentlemen sits by a window seat on a rooftop café with modern European furnishing, sipping on his espresso from what appears to be an expensive porcelain cup, gazing towards the Eiffle Tower in the distance, all the while with a violinist performing live in the background. This scene not only romanticize the

⁴ Up to date, *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* has hosted eleven special overseas editions covering the following countries: Australia (2011), the United States (2011, 2012), England (2012), France (2012), Canada (2012), Korea (2012), New Zealand (2013), Germany (2013), Italy (2013, 2014). At the same time, the show also accepts Chinese speaking participants from all over the world for its regular editions.

bourgeois French lifestyle, but also perpetuate a glamorized and idealized image of the capitalist west.

The special overseas edition of *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* is a marketing strategy used to generate high viewership thus advertising revenues and profits for the television producers. Ironically the show develops a set of televisual images that strengthens the state's project of national image building. What is projected on the Chinese television is a set of images that showcases China's well-accomplished and high achieving individuals.

Take the participants of the French special edition of *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* as an example, one walks away with the impression that Chinese people living in France are fashionable, well-established and high-achieving. Female participants are all young and attractive. They are fair and slim, and in their silk ball gowns or lace cocktail dresses, every one of them possess starlet potentials. While not all the ladies in the show are of model height, they certainly walk and stand gracefully in their five inch heels. Although there is more leeway with men, bachelors on the shows are generally handsome and well dressed. Both female and male participants from the show are representative of China's middle class or petty bourgeois. They are mostly college educated if not in the process of obtaining a degree. While most occupation of Chinese bachelors living in France comprise of private entrepreneur, investment banker, pastry chef, musician, and engineers, most bachelorettes are fashion designers, make-up artists, luxury product managers, and movie producers. As Janice Hua Xu observes,

"Many of these shows target the urban middle class specifically, addressing aspects of their effort to establish and maintain a modern lifestyle and balance the demands of home and career. These programs provide a space for the growing middle class to play a role in public media outlets, share their views on social issues or consumer matters, and express their creativity without endangering themselves politically" (Xu, 2009, p. 159).

However, the proliferated appearance of these young, fashionable, high achieving bachelorettes on the show across Chinese televisions divert and dilute the viewers' attention from China's hundreds of millions of young rural women who live in harsh conditions and face extreme poverty. In her study of Communication in China,

Zhao (2008) provides a vivid description of the life of these rural women which forms a stark contrast with those who bachelorettes on show. She says,

“On the other hand, some poor rural women, who stay at home to look after the young, the old, the livestock, and the crops in depressed rural villages and who have found their cries lost in a cacophony of one-way mass ‘communication’ that seldom address their immediate needs and concerns, have found death to be their only means of social communication – suicide rates among rural Chinese women are the highest of all population groups in the world.” (Zhao, 2008, p. 158)

The way *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* portrays the image of young Chinese women highlight and magnify the identity that China wishes to construct for its Generation Y – high achieving, metropolitan, and modern. As Xu (2009). points out, program like *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* provide a space where individuals can relate to the changing world outside and reclaim control over their lives at a time when China is going through rapid social transformation. By watching such reality program, viewers – be they rural or urban - through their mediated imagination acquire the ability to construct new individual identities. As Lemi Baruh and Jihoon Park (2010) points out, “reality TV functions to reinforce the dominant ideologies associated with social groups such as class” (p. 8). On this note, Xu (2009) articulates although the show limits itself to certain socio economic groups, it opens up a new space for the Chinese to define their middle class identity. Therefore, deliberate or not, *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* works to further perpetuate the glamorized image of the urban middle class in Chinese television consolidating their dominant social position.

3.2.2. Redefining Uyghurs

On October 28th 2013, a car loaded with gasoline plowed into a crowd at the Tiananmen Square, bursting into flames, leaving five people were killed and forty wounded (Rajagopalan & Blanchard, 2014). On March 1st 2014, an attack by knife-wielding men at the Kunming railway station left at least 29 dead and another 130 people wounded (BBC, 2014). Both premeditated, violent attacks have been confirmed by the Xinhua News Agency as acts carried out by Xinjiang Uyghur Separatist Force (BBC, 2014; Rajagopalan & Blanchard, 2014). Uyghurs are a Muslim ethnic minority that reside in Xinjiang, China. For decades, Uyghurs have been fighting for autonomy

and separation from the Chinese state, and their resistance movement is becoming increasingly radicalized (Beech, 2014). After the March bloodshed in Kunming, Chinese negative perceptions towards ethnic Uyghurs heightened. As media commentator Chunshan Mu (2014) observes, the online images of Uyghurs goes is a combination of fear, distrust and prejudice. Mu points out that “a lack of trust between Uyghur and Han will continue to frustrate efforts to achieve ethnic unity” (2014). Given the Chinese public’s current perception towards Uyghurs, how does *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao*, the Chinese adapted So You Think You Can Dance, attempt to revert the negative image towards Uyghurs and promote ethnic unity?

In his study of Chinese perceptions of television’s function and influence, Schneider argues propaganda and education go hand in hand in Chinese production of television content (Schneider, 2012). Although Schneider contends the aim of such propaganda focuses more on providing guidance for good behavior and supplying viewers with role models, I argue in the case of *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao*, there is a didactical dimension of the show aimed specifically at recasting the image of Uyghur in a positive light. Gulmire Muhammed, the 2014 winner of *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao*, is a particularly important figure in the show who distances the Uyghur name in mainstream popular culture away from those commonly associated with terrorist attacker or extreme separatist force.

Throughout the entire competition, Muhammed takes on the Uyghur ambassador role showcasing the rich and varied Uyghur culture to Chinese audience. At the same time, Muhammed’s demeanour serves as a constant reminder that that Uyghur people are friendly, cheerful and humble. In Muhammed’s first appearance on stage, she has not only left the audience with a folk dance brimming with vitality and happiness, by establishing herself as a mother, a wife, and a dance teacher, she also temporarily ‘fixes’ the negative stereotypes Chinese have towards ethnic Uyghurs. During the commentary section after her initial performance, Muhammed reveals her identity as a mother. With her four year old daughter and her husband both present in the studio, the host invites both of them to join Muhammed on stage. Once up on the stage, the family stands in front of the audience whereby Muhammed carries her daughter in her arm, while her husband stands right beside her with his arm wrapped around her shoulder. This family

reunion on stage serves a highly symbolic purpose. It juxtaposes Uyghur people together with the image of family and love. The camera also presents multiple close up shots of Muhammed's daughter who has curly locks, sparkling eyes, chubby cheeks and a big bright smile. This visual presentation of Muhammed's daughter illuminates the innocence and purity in Uyghur people which contrast sharply with those violent and intimidating individuals from the Uyghur extreme separatist force that often come across in the Chinese media.

Furthermore, throughout the entire competition, Muhammed constantly appears on stage in Xinjiang's eye-catching and gem-studded costume. Although she is an excellent western contemporary jazz dancer, Muhammed insists on showcasing ethnic dances from her hometown. In all of her performances, Muhammed bedazzles the national audience with her light and graceful, yet powerful and quick-swinging dance movements. Muhammed's colorful ethnic costumes and exuberant dance style refreshes the audiences' memory of the exotic and legendary Uyghur living in China's far west territories. Muhammed's vivacious smile during each performance also serves as a reminder of Uyghur people's passion, enthusiasm and love of life. Moreover, the judges - most of whom are ethnic Han - not only approve Muhammed's fine technical skills but are also impressed with her creative ability to innovate and modernize traditional ethnic dance. In his comments, judge and professional dance artist Huang Doudou said (2014), "We say that the first stage of presenting ethnic and folk dance is to show a style, the second is to show the culture. But you have given us the highest level: that is, to allow the audience to see the ethnic group's totem through your performance." On the surface, such media text appears to be a personal praise towards Muhammed's dance achievements, however the underlying text suggest the real essence of Uyghur culture is what is embodied in Muhammed's dance - not violence nor brute force, but resilience, strength and vitality.

With Muhammed taking home the title of this year's China's Most Beloved Dancer, *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao* is therefore more than a reality dance talent show that showcases China's top dancers. It is a platform in which the Uyghurs, an ethnic minority which Chinese people often associate with in a negative light, gets a chance to reshape its image. The selection of this year's winner not only reflects Chinese' conception of

talent and appreciation for dance, but an act of recognition that celebrates Uighur people's enthusiasm and passion for life. *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao* thus offers a renewed vision of an often contested and crisis-ridden aspect of the Chinese identity that serves to promote Chinese ethnic unity.

3.2.3. Pleasant Peasant

As mentioned earlier in the text, Deng's pragmatic economic reform and long decades of unchecked economic growth has led to widespread social and ecological damage within China's domestic sphere. In particular, economic stratification and widespread social inequality are pressing issues plaguing the Chinese population. As Sun and Zhao (2009) reveal, "the richest 10 percent of the urban population own 45 per cent of the assets in urban China, compared with 1.4 per cent owned by the poorest 10 percent" (p. 99). This acute class polarization have inevitability incited public anger towards the new rich in China, which in turn deepens the existing class divide. How then does the quotidian space of television narratives ameliorate tensions between the urban middle class and China's vast rural population?

As one of the most popular Chinese reality TV shows, *Baba Qu Na Er* focuses on examining issues pertaining to parent-child relationships. The program documents celebrity fathers with their young children travelling together and completing various assigned tasks in rural Chinese villages. The premise of the show is to reveal how celebrity dads treat and communicate with their children, and how they bond with each other in the absence of mothers. The popularity of the show arises from its attempt to address social reality (Yuan, 2013). As China deepens its market-oriented reform, the high cost of urban living and the cutthroat career competition in big cities, put the man of every family under immense financial pressure. Many young parents in China, in particular the fathers, have to work overtime in order to keep their jobs or to get a promotion (Ibid.). Such dilemma leaves fathers with almost no time to spend with their children. Father in rural areas also face the dilemma of this reality. As a media commentator (Yuan, 2013) reveals, "more and more men from underdeveloped areas are now working as migrant workers in developed areas, such as south and east China's coastal areas, leaving their children at home under the grandparent's care." While

Chinese fathers focus on earning money and establishing their careers to create a better life for their family, they have neglected the opportunity to spend time with their children. In turn, a whole generation of Chinese have grown up with absentee fathers. *Baba Qu Na Er* series thus capitalizes on the concept of fatherhood, and aims to repair the broken relationship between the father and their kid(s). The show is emotionally captivating for many audience member began to reflect upon their own father-child relationships - whether with their own father or with their own child (Joanna, 2013).

With the show premised upon fatherhood, the question remains: how does *Baba Qu Na Er* use its televisual narratives to lessen the tensions between urban rural divide? The setting of the show is a particularly important factor in achieving this objective. Each season, the show features twelve episodes which are shot in six different remote Chinese villages. This implies that *Baba Qu Na Er 2* brings the audience back to China's country side and unravel what the lives of people there are like. For instance Episode 1 of Season 2 takes place in Tiankeng village in Wulong county of Chongqing Province. The village in which the father and their children live and complete mission in is surrounded by weathered karst hills, cliffs, deep gorges and stone bridges. Drones are used to capture aerial views of the splendid Karst landscapes in which the village is situated, and the presentation of the primitive and rugged sceneries are often times cinematic. By focusing on the rich green canvas of the forest canopy, the waddling duck crowds beside the pond, the tadpoles swimming in the clear water of the terraced rice paddies, the rice farmer happily working in the field, the show directors create an illusion that life in the countryside is, tranquil, peaceful, re-freshening and rejuvenating. When the five fathers and their kids first arrived at the village and saw the scenic landscape, they all remarked "woah!", "so pretty!", and "it's amazing!" Together, these televisual narratives and images implicitly suggest Tiankeng villagers live at a place with natural sceneries which Chinese city dwellers can not afford in their day to day life. The villagers are rich and wealthy in a different sense than the city dwellers.

Whenever the father and their children arrive at a new location, the first assignment is to select housing and accommodation. They will first have a round of house viewing and then the dads will compete in games to determine the order of selection. The houses are usually pre-selected by the producers. Each house is unique

in its own way in terms of features, decor, amenities and location. However, these houses tend to be fragile adobe or wooden shacks with substandard living condition, an indication of poverty. Such housing is emblematic of the underdeveloped economy of rural Chinese villages and the immense economic stratification within the country. Nonetheless, the show uses its narratives and visual presentations to mediate the imagination of the audience member so as reshape their impression about the primitive living condition of the country side. At the same time, the television texts euphemize the rustic shacks and re-direct audience members to think that those houses are dream houses that all children and their dad in the shows compete for. The following dialogues and narrations offer some insight to how the show constructs an idealized conception of the show amongst its viewer:

Table 3.1. Television Text Translation of *Baba Qu Na Er 2*

Character	Television Text <i>Baba Qu Na Er - Season 2 Episode 1</i> English Translation
Voice Over	The first house is the Mill House located at the bottom of the mountain. It is clean and tidy.
Joe	Wow! Let's consider this house!
Duoduo	Dad! I don't think it's the country side here. It's like a castle!
Gary	Grace, do you like this room?
Grace	Yes.
Voice Over	The second house is the Corn House. The entire bedroom is decorated with corns hanging from the ceiling. All the kids are instantaneously drawn to the corn piles at the corner of the room.
Voice Over	The third house is the Bee House. It is owned by the beekeeper of this Tiankeng village. Will the kids be playful and ask for honey to eat from the beekeeper?
Voice Over	The fourth house has a beautiful and melodic wind chime hung in the center of the room. However none of the kids seems to be particularly drawn to this house.
Voice Over	The last house is nestled in a cave high up in the mountain. It has a scenic view of the entire village.
Duoduo	This house the prettiest! It's so romantic!

With the voice over repeatedly highlighting the unique features of each house, audience members focus less on the substandard living conditions of the country side. Furthermore, the children's excitement and enthusiasm towards these houses prompts audience members to fantasize about living in them.

These tranquil and enthralling televisual image of the country life contrasts sharply from those stories that urban readers, viewers, or listeners often hear from the media. As Sun and Zhao (2009) points out, the media often occupies itself with sad stories soliciting the public to donate money to either “migrant worker who needs an astronomical sum for her child’s medical procedure, or the family of a peasant who commits suicide because he cannot find money to pay for his son’s university fee” (p. 101). While the traditional methodology attempts to cultivate cross-class love in the media to reduce tensions in China’s increasingly class-divided society, *Baba Qu Na Er* tries to normalize the urban middle class gaze towards the country side so as to create an illusion that the primitive way of life is invaluable and popularly sought after. As Xu explains (2009), “[therefore] media product provides a systematic way for images of the modern lifestyle to circulate among television viewers, creating texts as mirrors of reality” (pp. 153-154). Although Xu speaks of media products and modern lifestyle in particular, I believe that when the audience imagines about the lifestyles in the countryside, learn to appreciate and enjoy the simple rural way of life, these fantasies contribute to the affirmation that the current Chinese peasant life is pleasant, in turn enabling the state’s continuation of its economic development.

3.3. Enacting the Chinese Nation

In his analysis of the annual Spring Festival staged each year by the national CCTV network, Zhongdang Pan (2006) argues the gala entails a political structure with a centripetal force that pulls subjects towards its center. In Pan’s words, the gala is “structured as a constellation that conforms to the Chinese imagination of an empire state” (Pan, 2006, p. 249). Interestingly the same political structure in one or another is embedded in *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao* and *Baba Qu Na Er*. Recall the three scenarios extracted from each reality program at the beginning of the essay, the seemingly unrelated scenarios in fact illuminate a few essential elements that constitute the Chinese nation which in turn contributes to construction of the imagined Chinese ‘empire state’.

To begin with, *Baba Qu Na Er 2* is particularly clever in its cast selection to enable a mediated imagination of Cross-Strait unification⁵, as well as Hong Kong's return to the motherland. The five celebrity fathers in the second season features a Taiwanese singer, a Hong Kong actor and three mainland Chinese actors and athlete. With all participants in the show conversing in Mandarin, this gesture legitimizes Mandarin as the default language through which Chinese from different origins communicate with each other. Furthermore, when Muhammed puts aside her Uyghur dialect and resort to communicating with the audience and the judges in Mandarin throughout the competition, this serves as an indicator of Mandarin's hegemonic status within the Chinese empire state. Moving on, the producers of *Baba Qu Na Er 2* in Episode 06 planned and designed a seemingly apolitical yet highly symbolic outdoor sports meet for the father and their children to partake in. All participants of the sports meet wore track suits pre-prepared by the show producers that had the Chinese characters of 'China' printed across the jacket. As the children and their father engage in fun and competitive sports events while wearing this special jacket, the constituency of the Chinese nation is enacted across the screen – whether if you are from Hong Kong or Taiwan, you 'represent' China. Therefore, in this particular instance, audience not only watch an entertainment show focused on child rearing issues, they are witness to an instance of the production of China in making.

As one Chinese media critic points out (Liao, 2014), one of the highlight of this seasons' *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao* is its numerous ethnic dancers. Competing with Muhammed in the Season Finale are nine other dancers with many from Inner Mongolia and Tibet. The presence of various Chinese ethnic minorities on stage, dancing in their traditional costumes and competing for China's Most Beloved Dancer title, is itself a political gesture that projects a multi-ethnic image that confirms' China's multi-ethnic constitution.

Finally, *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* can be interpreted as an instance in which China goes global. Before turning to examine how the show enacts the Chinese nation on a

⁵ Cross-Strait Unification refers to the political unification of the People's Republic of China (China) and the Republic of China (Taiwan).

global stage, it is necessary to first review the concept of China as a cultural empire. As Pan explains,

China as a cultural empire has no hard boundaries limiting its reach; it involves synchronized activities across a vast space, both in China and under heaven (*tian xia*). It also observes a strict system of admission based on blood ties and nurtured by Chinese culture. Within this system, sharp boundaries are drawn between 'us' and 'them', but where the boundaries lie is to be determined by the political center. Ethnic minorities are admitted into this empire because, as their performances on the national festival stage show, they contribute to the extension of the empire's reach, both geographically and in people's hearts and minds. Even people of different skin colors may be admitted when they transform themselves in engaging authentic Chinese cultural practice (Pan, 2006, p. 250).

This is symbolically shown in the special overseas edition of *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*. First, the presentation of high-achieving, well established single overseas Chinese on the show is a declaration of the participants' bonds towards China. Their return to China in search for the love of their life illuminates their enduring emotional connection to the motherland which cannot be severed. The physical features of all participants which are recognizably Chinese and their desire to reconnect with China is an illustration of the strong Chinese blood tie. Moving on, the last male bachelor who made his appearance in *Fei Cheng Wu Rao's* French special edition deserves special attention. As a French expatriate in China, Marc Zhou⁶ is deeply in love with Chinese culture to the extent that he has only dated Chinese girls in his entire love history. He speaks Chinese fluently and eloquently, as if Chinese is mother tongue. In the show Marc has also openly claimed China as his second home. According to Pan's principle, as a foreigner if Marc cannot be admitted as a full Chinese, he may at least be recognized as 'friends' or 'son-in-law' if he marries a Chinese girl. Therefore through *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, the show presents Chinese subjects that transcends China's territorial boundaries. In Pan's words, "It is global in reach. It is limitless in self-confidence. It is poised for the new century when China is destined to change the world" (2006, p. 251).

⁶ Zhou is Marc's adopted Chinese last name. Marc's French last name is not identified in the show.

Although Michele Byers's insight is situated in a Canadian context, it is useful in helping us understand the visual politics of Chinese reality television. Byers argues in her *Canadian Idol and the Myth of National Identity* (2008) that,

Media images are ideological, invested in what can be presented as authentic in a given context. Although these images can be contested, they are important purveyors of the discourses that construct identity, difference, and nation in Canada and legitimize and render certain identities legible, visible, and authentic while others are marginalized, if seen at all (Byers, 2008, p. 77).

Therefore, *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao*, and *Baba Qu Na Er* are important venues through which the notions of who and what is China are reinforced and made to matter.

Chapter 4. Conclusion

As China further develops its market oriented economy, television in China becomes increasingly dependent on advertising revenue for its survival. With advertising accounting for 90 percent of TV revenue, audience rating is critical in evaluating the financial success of various programs (Xu, 2009). Furthermore, as Wang Hui observes, China's post-revolution economic reform is characterized by a depoliticization process (Zhong, 2010). This implies that the waning of traditional political ideology increasingly positions the market as an adhesive factor holding society together (Lu, 2009). This implies that Chinese television programs not only need to maximize profit for their sponsors and advertisers, they also need to take on a political role delivering more subtle and more palatable form of state ideologies to the viewers.

Fei Cheng Wu Rao, *Zhong Guo Hao Wu Dao*, and *Baba Qu Na Er 2* are not only successful reality programmes generating considerable values for sponsors and advertisers, but they also contain a subtle and palatable political undertone that serves to concretize various facets of China's ambivalent and ambiguous identity. These televisual platforms enables a spatial and cultural reconfiguration of Chinese national politics. First of all, Chinese reality television works to determine the identity of China's middle class whose size and exact constitutions remains fuzzy. This validates Zhao's (2011) observation of Chinese media which "embrace the discourse of social strata and dedicates themselves to the formation of the middle class, making its growth a national project that signifies China's membership in the developed world" (p. 567).

Moreover, each show in their own ways appeal to a pan-Chinese nationalism, or "modern Chinese transnationalism" (Zhao, 2011, p. 565). In Zhao's (2011) words, "they work to support the unfinished business of reclaiming sovereignty over all Chinese territories under imperialist rule (Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan) [...] as well as the 'undergrounded empires' of overseas Chinese diaspora" (p. 565). Furthermore, while

Chinese reality television shows operate on a transnational level to consolidate the meaning of Sinophone cultures under the rubric of the PRC, they also mobilize a kind of ethno-nationalist discourse that works to minoritize Uyghurs and other ethnic minority groups. The expression of such Chinese nationalism at times appears chauvinistic, reflecting what Leslie Sklair (2001) described as “an arrogant overconfidence in the over-privileged” (p. 29) in response to China’s economic ascendancy. On the other hand, the repeated emphasis of China as a multiethnic nation as well as the repeated demonstration of China’s willingness to welcome foreign friends can also be seen as an indication of the international legacy of Chinese nationalism – whereby China appreciates and embraces a diverse ethno-cultural identity.

While Chinese reality televisions make visible the various individuals who constitute the greater China, they also attempt to ameliorate social tensions and ethnic conflicts that plague contemporary China. The process of addressing the structural inequalities in post-reform China is one characterized by a set of depoliticization strategies that attributes the class-charged political issues as cultural difference in a hierarchy of national belonging (Zhao, 2011). Undeniably, the Maoist discourse of class and class struggles – a vital concept that aims to foster dominant class subjectivities which serves to dismantle class relations formed through a history of unequal property relations (Zhao, 2009) – have been abandoned by the contemporary Chinese television. However, there are still sporadic instances of China’s socialist rhetoric at work. For instance in *Baba Qu Na Er*, the romanticized images of Chinese rural village may be an effort to normalize the urban middle class gaze towards the underdeveloped and low-income regions of China. However, from a different point of view, the return of the privileged Chinese echelons to the countryside can also be interpreted as a continuation of the efforts to bridge Three Great Divides⁷ where by city-dwellers learn from the peasants, and transform their own petti-bourgeoisie class consciousness.

Television, as Zhong (2010) articulates, entail heavy linguistic presence that connotes, denotes and naturalizes symbols or images. It not only brings to light the

⁷ the divides between rural and urban China, between workers and peasants, and between manual labor and mental labor

multi-ethnicity and global aspect of Chinese nation, but also showcases the individual constituents of greater China. Borrowing Pan's (2006) words, these reality programs serves as platforms through which "all Chinese see their collective self, live the magic of being Chinese, and renew their bonds with family members" (p. 252). The image of this collective self may be one that is complex, contradictory, constantly shifting and to a certain extent propagandistic. However, echoing Byers (2008), we must continually work to understand these identities and the landscape within which they are produced. The struggles over China's nation at times appears to be chauvinistic and assertive, but it also entails socialist and internationalist legacies that can often be easily overlooked. By performing close examinations on entertainment based apolitical televisual text, we open up more platforms to develop a fuller understanding of the tensions and struggles which China is experiencing at a time of its rapid social transformation. The investigation on Chinese reality television has just begun, there is still much work a head of us.

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