

## MASTER'S THESIS

### Discourses on urbanism: "Reality televisions" by Jiangsu Satellite Television since 2010

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*Date of Award:*  
2014

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**Discourses on Urbanism: “Reality Televisions” by Jiangsu  
Satellite Television since 2010**

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**A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Philosophy**

**Principal Supervisor: Prof. MAN Kit Wah, Eva**

**Hong Kong Baptist University**

**July 2014**

## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of MPhil at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this or any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: July 2014

# Discourses on Urbanism: “Reality Televisions”<sup>1</sup> by Jiangsu Satellite Television Since 2010

## Abstract

Since 2004, the Chinese media scene has been dominated by what is called the “pan-reality television” trend. Reality television is capable of synchronizing the effects of all the political, economic, and cultural factors into the participants’ actions and becoming a powerful reconstruction of the social environment from which it emerges. The thesis takes Jiangsu Satellite TV (JSTV)’s golden hour reality televisions as the case to address the question of how they express, reflect and formulate the imaginations and understandings of urban living, focusing on the cultural, social, and political specificities of these reality television shows.

The thesis is an attempt to bring into discussions ignored aspects of popular television culture that can be potential source for furthering the understanding of urban conditions in China. The thesis finds that the images, the discursive fields, and the procedures of the games in the reality television shows and the governmental regulations imposed on them are part of the mechanisms to disassemble a set of discourses into the colloquial, the practices of urban lives, and possibly the imaginations of urban lifestyles. Emerging out of this dynamic process is the formulation of a way of life in the context of urban China – specifically, the linear, individual progressivity. The main body of the thesis will empirically show how the linear, individual progressivity is installed and enacted in the shows and political implications of that.

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<sup>1</sup> “Reality television,” or *Zhenren Xiu*, is a general concept that describes a category of television programs which allows hybrid of different television formats as well as various local adaptations of imitated foreign programs. Formats of game show, talent show, career show as well as dating show are several of the main forms to constitute a range of factually based television programs which at same time goes beyond simple factuality of the content. Different from the genre studies in Western research, the term “reality television” has attained culturally specific connotations as a result of how television industry has emerged in China since the 1980s. The specific connotations of “reality television” in the Chinese context will be explained in the introduction chapter and the literature review section.

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to show my foremost gratitude to my principal supervisor Prof. Eva Man, who has shown incredible support for my study and research. Her warm, continuous encouragements and generous guidance have helped me go through difficult stages of both my research and my personal growth. I would also like to express my special appreciation and thanks to Prof. Kwai Cheung Lo, whose critical comments have always helped me realize the limitations of my research, and whose works have been tremendous inspiration in my academic development.

My sincere thanks also go to Prof. John Erni, who never spares his brilliant insights on the thesis and my future research, and to Dr. Daisy Tam and Dr. Charles Cheung, from whom I have received invaluable advice that have improved the arguments of my thesis. I would like to thank the rest of the faculty, for their support in various seminars and activities; in particular, I am grateful to Prof. Stephen Chu, especially for enlightening me during the very early stage of my research. I am also indebted to Prof. Anthony Fung, whose critiques have helped forming my thesis into its final shape.

Furthermore, I would also like to acknowledge with much appreciation the crucial role of the department secretaries, without whose help, the two years of study would not have been so smooth. Special thanks go to my fellow graduate students, especially for standing by me throughout the past years.

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## Introduction

Aspects of urban reality are perceived and imagined through changing facets of the material cityscape – the geographical expansion of urban areas, the gentrification and renewal of urban spaces. However, contrary to the visible physical transformation of urban spaces which has been the focus of media representation of the developing China, urbanism as a way of life, which is felt and embodied individually but takes effect collectively, is still obscure: the correlations between the factuality of urban lifestyles and the materiality of the city are elusive. How, when situated amid the material transformations of city life, do populations make sense of their lives, and what are the possible frameworks for that? Imaginations of a good city life and behaviors toward the practice of a certain lifestyle are constructed on many levels – presumably political, economical, and cultural levels – and they form a complex and interconnected field of forces.

To decipher the dynamics of the defining forces that formulate urban imaginations, I will investigate a certain range of interactive media products, which both go beyond the sheer factuality of the media content and still falls under the frame of representing something “real” in life – this range of television products produced in a specific Chinese context I denote with the term “reality television shows”. Yet such denotation is in fact intended to transverse the definition and taxonomy of reality television as a specific genre, as I will show in the thesis. The study includes a range of reality television shows produced by the provincial television network Jiangsu Satellite Television (JSTV). In the chapter 2, 3 and 4 of this thesis, I will study the case of JSTV, showing how different forces are synchronized into one platform.

Renowned for its reality television shows, JSTV has achieved nationwide recognition and economic success. To address JSTV’s late-night golden hour reality television shows since 2010, this research proposes the following main question:

- (a) What are the cultural, social, and political specificities of the reality television shows in expressing, reflecting, and formulating the imaginations and understanding of urban lives in contemporary China?

This overarching question leads the study on discourses of urbanism that are imbibed in these reality televisions - these discourses can be both representations and mechanisms to define what city life is and to mobilize the city population in their everyday practices. So this study is further broken down into the following questions on discourses:

- (b) What discourses on the constituencies of urban life are produced in the reality television shows?
- (c) How are these discourses produced and how are they enacted to mobilize the population?
- (d) Why are such discourses produced?

To answer these questions, I propose the taxonomy of three sets of discourses that are made predominant by the theme of JSTV's golden hour reality televisions: discourse on space-time, discourse on knowledge and discourse on family ethics. The connection between the macro and micro management of power are exemplified on all these three dimensions of discourse, closing the gap between the understanding of the macro political-economic context to the micro operations of the show and the embodiment of power by the participants and audience. These three sets of discourses integrate to define the possible imageries of urban life and the practical course of actions to achieve the imagined state of life. The analysis on the each of the three sets will constitute one chapter of the thesis' main body. These chapters will justify the choice of the three dimensions of discourse.

### *1. Background and Clarification of Keywords*

In primary textbooks, socialist posters, and contemporary advertisements, cities are portrayed as flawless, glamorous places without empty spaces, devoid of uncertainty and anxiety. Absence, however, does not mean non-existence. Urbanization and urban civilizations have existed for over 2000 years. According to Sit, after the turn to Communism and its subsequent post-socialist transformation, China has experienced more problems with urbanization than at

any time before. The problems are due in part to a rural population that is “on the move,”<sup>2</sup> the high mobility of the urban population, and insufficient infrastructure support,<sup>3</sup> as well as to the inherent traits of urbanism, such as “impersonality,” “heterogeneity,” and “tolerance” (Simmel 55–56) and “universalistic attitudes” (Wirth 1–24). Indeed, many stories have been told (and are waiting to be told) about city people and city life in China, yet the overall picture of how to understand urban lives is still opaque, perhaps because imagining urban lives in the present and in the future is difficult, especially when it is on such a large scale. Thus, a survey based on a more concrete and individual level, without sacrificing the big picture, would be useful in an attempt to further our understanding of urban life. Therefore, in this study I critically assessed media products, especially reality television shows in contemporary China, in relation to the question of how urbanism is presented, reflected, and formulated.

While urbanization characterizes the transformation of country space to economically and politically centered city space, “city” does not equate to “urban space” or “urbanism.” Urbanism, according to Wirth, is “a way of life” (1), a more abstract form of existence with certain psychological states and forms of life, “a particular form of human association” (4). Thus, urbanism can exist outside of what one considers a city and city life does not always entail urbanism. The common traits of urbanism, such as isolation, the “blasé,” and the “schizoid” characteristic of urban personalities, are subjects that can be explained by “a theory of urbanism,” which permeates aspects of both the material and the immaterial milieu of living. In using the term “urbanism,” I attempted to analyze the construction of a form of life – its fundamental characteristics and the basic forms of both material and mental life – or, rather, the imaginations of such.

Presumably, the imaginations of a form of life are not created by isolation from the material aspects of a city. First, a city is perceived to exist materially. A city’s existence is constructed by various “places” in its dwellers’ everyday lives. A city is a collection of roads, buildings, and all types of built-in communication channels. It can also be a construction of economic flow in the form of factories,

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<sup>2</sup> “On-the-move” refers to the migration of the rural population to the city, especially as cheap migrant laborers. See *On the move: Women and rural-to-urban migration in contemporary china*. Ed. Arianna Gaetano and Tamara Jacka. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See Zhang, Kevin H. The evolution of China’s urban transformation: 1949–2000, in *Urban transformation in China*, Ed. Aiming Chen, Gordon G. Liu, and Kevin H. Zhang. Hants and Burlington: Ashgate, 2004, 25–39.

harbors, and shopping centers, or of political units in the form of churches, government buildings, and schools. Yet in this thesis, my focus is on another ubiquitous element within the urban social and psychological sphere: city life as portrayed by the media. In reality television shows in China, cities are not merely the backgrounds, settings, and surroundings but oftentimes the core discourses that give media the language to speak on any issue. It can be asserted that cities in the media are not just a mirror of cities; instead, the media portrays cities and city lives in a more abstract way, which sometimes can be closer to the urban population than cities in the material sense. In other words, cities can be the premise of media content.

The emergence of reality television shows in China is a correlated phenomenon of the urbanization process. The increased domestic space in cities and the spread of internet service have boosted the popularization of Internet usage and online video streaming – by 2005, there were already more than 100 online video streaming websites – which has sowed the seeds for the rapid growth of the numbers of reality television shows that can be viewed and reviewed online. JSTV have taken advantage of this development and established their own video channels for episodes streaming and news, the convenience of which has boosted the public discussions and revisiting of popular episodes or scenes. The online release of JSTV’s reality television episodes also clears the obstacle for digital reproduction of JSTV’s materials. New consumption patterns in commodities, such as television products, “bring new possibilities for individuals to shape their own images and identities” (Xu, “Building” 151). Reality television shows mediate imaginations and trigger symbolic participation, especially those which are related to the aspirations of urban lives. These reality television shows are mostly produced in major provincial capitals in urban China. The excessive imaginations about urban lives visible in the growth of reality television shows since 2005 have garnered nationwide attention. How do these reality television shows construct the imaginations of urban life in China? What are the cultural, social, and political specificities of the reality television shows in expressing, reflecting, and formulating the developing mega-cities populations’ mentality and understanding of urban lives in contemporary China? What discourses on the constituencies of urban life are produced by reality television, and how are they produced?

In this thesis, these concerns about urban living are approached from the port side, through the contemplation of media content reflective of the structures and dimensions of urbanism in China. It is through this lens that we should attempt to view a specific range of media phenomena in China. Having recognized the complexity of urbanism in China, I have come to realize that capturing certain moments would be more accurate than any attempted comprehensive views on these themes. Thus, in this thesis, I will investigate the particular content and form of reality television shows aired on JSTV that suggest possible general perspectives in understanding urbanization in China.

## *2. The Selection of the Case*

The research subject chosen reflects my motive to go beyond studying reality television as portrayed in the media and its social impacts, as the focus of this thesis is to offer insights into understanding the social conditions from which reality television has emerged. This motive led to the decision to study the output of reality television shows shown on one particular television channel as opposed to individual programs shown over a spectrum of channels, as well as the preference of these reality television shows over those shown on different channels. The rationale for selecting this research subject will be explained in this section.

First, JSTV is a channel that serves as both a political-economic and a cultural entity – its political-economic status propels a provincial-level satellite network to have its own cultural identity and branding strategy to survive amid the competition in the television scene in China. As a provincial-level network and a satellite television channel, it has a unique political status with symbolic functions in terms of connecting the local with the central. Elaboration on the political specificities of provincial and satellite television networks is appropriate here. The television industry has undergone transformations in its function and role since China's economic reforms in the late 1980s, a time when television was

used as a tool for literacy education,<sup>4</sup> especially in “an environment of loosened ideological control and growing commercialization” (Xu, “Morality Discourse” 638). To promote and control what is shown on television, the industry has been regimented and regulated by a “four-level” system (*Sijibantai*, 四级办台), from which reality television emerged on stations such as JSTV. The incorporation of television production, distribution, and broadcast companies began in the 1980s, on this four levels: the central level (i.e., China Central Television – CCTV – in which the Chinese Communist Party has direct financial interests); the provincial level, whose shareholders are mainly provincial governments and regional companies in related industries; and the city level and the town level, both of which are categorized by the political statuses of their shareholders. The dynamics of the central level and the provincial level networks are the most pertinent for this thesis. The earliest popular reality television shows that reached nationwide audiences were produced and broadcasted by the provincial-level broadcaster Hunan Satellite TV, whose parent company is Golden Eagle Broadcasting System.

The incorporation of television entities has changed the motives of making television shows, as well as how a television channel’s influence is measured. The profit-seeking motive ensures that economic imperatives reign over other imperatives. According to Lui, advertisements account for over 85% of the total net income for most television networks,<sup>5</sup> whose profits are overwhelmingly derived from these advertisements. This is a phenomenon caused partly by the insufficiency of copyright protection and limitations in exporting programs, leaving provincial television networks largely dependent on viewers’ ratings and the strategic specialization of its programs. The popularization of the recent trend of reality television (including dating shows, game shows, and quiz shows) produced by JSTV has given this provincial-level channel a politically and economically prominent position in the television scene throughout China. In addition, as suggested by Lui, the incomplete industrialization of television in China has given provincial-level television networks the first-mover vantage point in expanding their industry chain (8). Two examples will serve as an illustration: JSTV’s parent company owns the rights to operate another 14 television channels,

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<sup>4</sup> See Li, Li. The television play, melodramatic imagination and envisioning the ‘Harmonious Society’ in post-1989 China, in *Journal of Contemporary China*, 26.69, 2011, 327–341.

<sup>5</sup> According to 2005 data. Xinmin, Liu. *Zhongguo dianshi daqushi*. Beijing: Huaxia Press, 11.

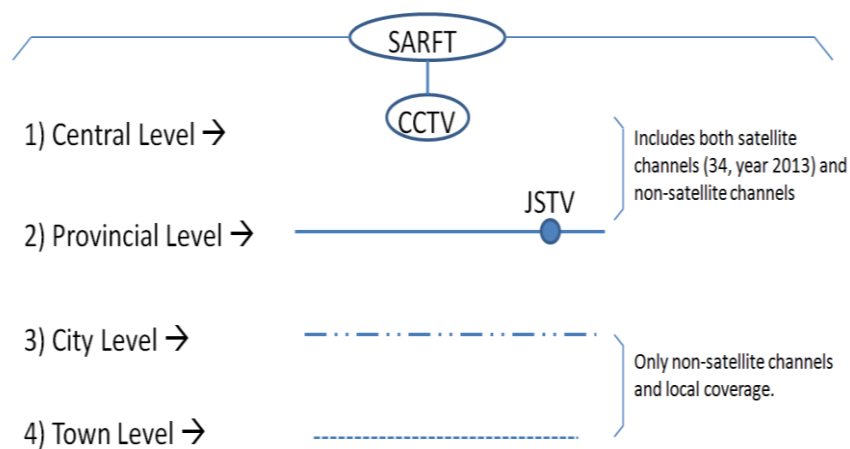
11 radio channels, a film production company, cinemas, an audio-visual publisher, and investment projects in new media and other related areas. The incorporation and acquisitions of different links in the industry chain has given JSTV the necessary human and capital resources for the development of new reality television shows. Similarly, the Golden Eagle Broadcasting System has a far-reaching network of sub-companies, such as two satellite television channels, a film production company, a film park, resorts, cinemas, an audio-visual publisher, magazines, a news journal, art, exhibitions, and advertisements. The provincial-level television channels are part of financially and politically powerful parent companies, which affords them a special position in which to link the local government to the central government, as well as certain flexibility in the media products they produce because of the economy of scale in the media business.

In the “four-level” system, provincial-level and satellite television channels occupy special political and economic positions. “China’s provinces, or rather the provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities at the immediate sub-central level of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), are considerable social, economic and political systems in their own right” (Goodman 1). Many innovations are led by provincial entrepreneurs and capital rather than by central control. Such is especially true in the media scene, as Micheal Keane comments that “development in China is more than ever provincial and networked...the cultural and media industry development processes that are occurring in China, both micro-level (small and medium enterprises) and macro-level (government policy intervention) challenge the inherited discipline-specific and sector-specific models of analysis that have dominated Western research of China.” (21) The “local government” of a province is symbolically also a mediating agency for the conflicting demands of national and local politics. The provincial-level television companies enjoy certain autonomy in economic behavior because the shareholders’ interests are, presumably, represented by the interests of their respective provincial governments, yet the actual production processes are more diverse and creative. The autonomy in the content production of the channel’s television programs are practically only restrained by pre-broadcast auditions and post-broadcast censorships (which means once the program proposal pass the pre-broadcast auditions, the program can be broadcast to the audience before it can be taken down by censorship) (Zhao 30-32). Delayed regulations and control from

the central authority prevails, which gives the possibilities of innovative formats and contents in provincial-level produced media products.

Among these provincial-level television companies, satellite television channels are invariably the main channels and they are considered a symbolic connection between the central government and the local government, in addition to being the “apparent representative of mainstream media” (Zhaofeng Li 14). By 2013, there were 34 provincial-level satellite television networks across China.

Diagram 1 The Four-Level System



The particular position of JSTV also subjects the channel to supervision by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television China (SARFT<sup>6</sup>).

(Diagram 1) The aggressive marketing strategy for the dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*” resulted in a sudden ban of the show and criticism of the channel. The program was accused of tolerating an excessively materialistic view toward life. Because of the widespread influence of both the dating show and JSTV, the banned program was able to resume after JSTV adjusted its tone on values in 2010. The suspension of the show by SARFT has been a lesson to provincial-level satellite television channels on the responsibility of being a representative of mainstream discourse in China. This incident demonstrates how provincial-level

<sup>6</sup> Merged with the General Administration of Press and Publication in March 2013, SARFT is now known as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of China (SAPPRFT). But because the thesis covers documents by this administration mainly from the year 2010 to 2012, I will refer to this administration in its previous name SARFT, instead of the current name SAPPRFT in this thesis.



satellite television networks must update their brand positioning in making television shows that, according to Li Zhaofeng, “matches [their] political status in the system, and redefines [their] relationship with the mainstream” (14).

Li’s study reveals that to survive under government constraints amid competition with their peers, provincial-level satellite television channels have taken their initiatives to develop a “branding strategy” to position themselves between the authorities and their audiences. In this sense, the functionality of television is produced by a channel’s portrayal of unity. For example, JSTV focuses on “emotions/feelings” and “happiness/well-being,” Hunan Satellite TV focuses on “happiness (in/of China),” Anhui Satellite TV focuses on “love,” and Shandong Satellite TV focuses on “justice.” The “branding strategy” represents positive channel images, which though not necessarily always reflect the mainstream values defined by the central authority, do not go against it. This “branding strategy” reflects the efforts of each channel to distinguish itself from the others by the content of their programs, catering to the different needs and tastes of their audiences. With different branding strategies, TV channels can orient their program content toward certain perspectives on certain issues. Thus, a channel’s design in featuring a range of reality television shows should echo the common concerns of its political-economic entity. The content produced by one single channel is sequenced from the same field of power struggles, though not necessarily from the same forces and force relations. Speculating over a range of distinct reality television shows (five in total) by the same entity will allow a more in-depth look into the forces behind this entity. Therefore, attention will be focused more on the field of forces than on the particularities of different political situations and cultural conditions of different channels. Choosing one channel will help retain the big picture, without sacrificing much specificity of the differences in the sub-genres of reality television.

Second, JSTV is the most successful channel in the production of reality television shows in terms of coverage and viewers’ ratings, and yet it has also been the most controversial channel in terms of value orientation, although it has gone through a series of strategy adjustments. In the second week after the launch

of the dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*” (“If You Are the One” 非诚勿扰<sup>7</sup>) in early 2010, the viewers’ ratings soared to 2.126% (Charm Media Research 11), resulting in JSTV’s top ranking among all the satellite TV channels and surpassing the five-year champion of entertainment shows, Hunan Satellite TV, to become the most viewed late-night program. This record was kept for several months. Controversial topics such as the cost of living and income discrepancy were brought to light in the dating show, triggering “disharmonizing” conflicts in the public’s view. These topics, which have been publicly debated by ordinary people elsewhere, attracted attention. Being the front-runner in the production of reality television shows, JSTV has set an example that has been visibly followed by other major successes. The positioning of the channel as an agent of promoting “happiness/well-being” and a mediator for “feelings/emotions” has led to such topics as family life, work, and school, themes that are close to its audiences and central to their concerns for a “happy” life superfluous in “feelings.” These bearings supply markedly interesting sources for understanding a city’s psychological landscape. It is curious that any trace of the city of Nanjing, where JSTV is located, is covered up in JSTV’s range of reality television programs that are aimed at nationwide reception, which again makes another interesting case for understanding urban lives without visible boundaries between cities.

The apparent conflicts between SARFT and JSTV have raised questions and suspicions on the prosperous development of the channel in the years that followed. Beginning with the controversial episodes of JSTV’s dating show, censures on the content of reality television shows and on the practices of satellite TV channels have been issued since 2010. Over the past three years, the evening programs (from 22:00 to 24:00) have undergone a series of adjustments to adjudicate a proper balance between marketability and instrumentality. As a provincially funded company, JSTV has adjusted its shows’ content and has diversified its reality television portfolio, marketing another four shows, including two game shows, “*Fei Dei Will Watch*” (非常了得) and “*Raid the Cage*” (芝麻开

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<sup>7</sup> The most studied golden hour reality television show of JSTV is the dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*”, also a main case of this thesis, sometimes referred to as “*If You Are the One*” and in occasional cases as “*Are You the True Love*” or “*If You Are Not Sincere, Don’t Bother Me*”. But because the title “*If You Are the One*” is shared by another two famous Chinese films which would be the main entries shown on Google or Baidu search if the words “If You Are the One” are keyed in, I will refer to the dating show by “*Feicheng-Wurao*” which can be easily searched on common searching engines.

门), one career shows, “*Tuoying-Erchu*” (literally, “Standing Out” 脱颖而出), and one quiz show (“*Yizhan-Daodi*” (literally, “Standing till the End” 一站到底). These four shows, covering different aspects of urban living in contemporary China, occupied the late-night slot from Monday to Friday (“*Feicheng-Wurao*” aired on Saturday evening) during the period of its highest stable viewers’ ratings. As a result of these adjustments in content, one area worth investigating is the controversial discourses that emerged, how they proliferated, and, ultimately, what drove this proliferation.

Third, I selected reality television programs that aired in 2010 for the content analysis sample because that year marked a turning point in the development of reality television in China. First, it was during this year that “*Feicheng-Wurao*” ignited the trend of reality television shows, and second, in 2010, reality television shows caught the attention of the authorities, which resulted in SARFT issuing regulations on the content of reality television shows, and later on the practices of provincial-level satellite TV channels as well. The subsequent changes in the discourses about/in television shows, including the discourse on “responsibility” on the surface and the multiple discourses hidden behind that change, made the shows more stimulating and intriguing in the contemplation of the mentality of city dwellers.

### 3. *Reality Television and Reality*

The term “reality television” is somewhat of a misnomer, as reality television shows are artificial<sup>8</sup> programs that are created to give the illusion of a real-life situation. The scenarios feature lines that are cut out of context and edited together; lights and cameras that are ready to portray certain characters in pre-designed story lines; commentators that set the tone of certain values; and online blogs that are led by professional blog writers. Pozner captured the essence of these reality shows by calling them “well-scripted” (1), just like any other sitcom and news reporting show on television. Why then are Chinese reality television

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<sup>8</sup> The word “artificial” is used by Richard Huff to describe how everyday settings, characters, and stories are artificially constructed in reality television. See Huff, Richard. Where does this stuff come from?, in *Reality television*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006, 11–29.

shows especially interesting in the investigation of urbanism, provided that reality television is anything but reality (as I will argue in subsequent chapters)? What is the nature of reality television and why is it a valid subject for a survey on urbanism?

### The “Unrealness” of Reality Television

Richard Huff’s book *Reality Television* illustrates the artificiality of reality television by providing rich insights into the industrial practices of making reality television shows. What especially interests him is how reality television shows manipulate their content and how the participants come out “dirty” after the show ends. The book highlights accepted “unrealness” as a common practice in making reality television shows, which is now considered the norm. However, this “unrealness” element of reality television is in fact a recent development. If, as Hill has suggested, reality television shows owe their origin to documentary television shows (39), it is implied that the documentation process must be authentic to a great extent. Clissold has convincingly argued against the common opinion that reality television shows started in the 1990s, as the first reality television show can actually be traced back to the American television program “Candid Camera” (which was created based on the American radio show “Candid Microphone”) in 1948. The show marketed itself by its “candidness,” with the host, Allen Funt, saying in the opening line, “I am the guy who hides the camera and microphone in places you least expect to find them, just so we can catch you in the act of *being yourself* (emphasis added).” Awkward moments like bumping into glass or grimaces in response to embarrassments are featured in this program as a way to satisfy voyeuristic desires, using hidden perspectives to watch real scenes and real people in their everyday authentic lives. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, “Candid Camera” appeared sporadically until the show was dropped in 1993, according to Kavka (17). During that time, numerous other shows had taken up the “disarmingly simple and repeatable” (Kavka 17) format of “Candid Camera.” The voyeuristic satisfaction found in “Candid Camera” was captured by the film *The Truman Show*, which focused on the imprisonment of the main character, Truman Burbank, who is the unsuspecting subject of a reality show that

is watched by billions of people around the world. Truman's vulnerability is rooted in being a "true man"; thus, "trueness" and "candidness" represent the audience's power over the subject being watched, which supplies pleasure for the audience. However, this voyeuristic satisfaction has revealed another theme in reality television that prevailed in later changes in this genre, which is, as Kavka has argued, the expression of anxiety over the unstoppable spread of surveillance (19).

A closer look at the more recent reality television shows, those that conventionally mark the emergence of reality television as a mainstream media form (Huff ix–10), including "Survivor," "Big Brother," and "American Idol," among others, has revealed that this dimension of generating pleasure by watching subjects being themselves is slowly being replaced by the dramatization and exaggeration of ordinariness. Such a development in reality television has been nearly synchronized in China, either by replicating the original foreign show or by introducing essential features of reality television into Chinese programs. This trend has emphasized ordinariness so that the role of the players in the reality television shows can be easily imagined and transferred to their audiences. The audiences' pleasure also results in a fulfillment of social learning purposes through watching television.

Despite the overgeneralization of the interpretation of this shift, the changes in the audiences' pleasure have had a profound influence over the nature of reality television. Typically, to maximize the shock and surprise often found in drama, the producers set up the drama and then wait for it to happen. The result is an artificial and yet real social situation, usually realized by a form of competition among the reality television show's participants. Competition is not fictitious but the way it is portrayed does not really happen in daily life. Since the beginning of the new millennium, "competition not only transformed reality TV formats but also gave reality TV a competitive edge in the industry" (Kavka 110). In fact, competition still dominates the reality television scene in China today. The popular reality television shows in China, including game shows, career shows, and dating shows, are just variations of the competition format disguised by themes like dating, self-presentation, and career-building. The rules of the game/competition become the essential part of reality television, which, without

surprise, turns the reality television shows into something that is more of a fabricated, manufactured, and controlled product of the producers.

Ironically, the arbitrary authenticity or realness of the content has become a main character of reality television shows. As Annette Hills neatly describes, “the more emphasis is placed on spectacle and style, the more audiences look for authenticity in people’s behavior, emotions and the settings for representations of reality,” (Restyling 16) implying again that the factual aspect of reality television reveal more than the mere reality as it is represented in the shows. The artificial elements in reality television shows have become a game of “hide-and-seek” and a competition between the participants and their audiences. The audiences not only remain skeptical about the authenticity of the drama and the identity and the behavior of the participants, but also they remain curious and alert for such fragments that give away the “fakeness” or acting in the show. The dynamic process of how shows are made to appeal to such needs synchronizes the factual and the imagined.

Such transplantation of the “unreal” reality television shows<sup>9</sup> has another twist in China. Online communities such as forums and bloggers have often asked, in a sarcastic tone, “Can’t he just fake it better so it is not too obvious?” In addition, quiz shows have been talked about as being competitions for those “capable of memorizing,” implying that the shows allow people to memorize as many answers as possible before going on the show; dating shows serve the alternative function of being a gateway for young models to start a career; and career shows are seen as the showing-off (or free advertisements) of small to medium-sized enterprises. Yet instead of criticizing the opportunistic incentives of the themes of these shows, audiences continue to embrace the drama displayed by these participants and enjoy the secret pleasure of feeling superior in their ability to penetrate others’ minds. Such pleasure in exposing “frauds” quickly caught the producers’ attention. In 2012, JSTV followed this trend by producing the game show “Fei Dei Will Watch,” using exactly this model of producing pleasure by creating a stage where participants are invited to guess whether certain statements by the other participants are real or not. This show reused the stage setting and most of the rules of its dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*,” changing only the

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<sup>9</sup> Several Chinese reality television researches recognize that “reality” is created through artificial settings in these shows. See Ni (2011), Ran (2001).

participants' roles: the participants no longer engaged in interviews with others for romantic relationships but, rather, enjoyed the thrill of investigating whether the others' statements or descriptions of themselves were true. The enthusiasm and the humor with which this show was met mapped the pleasure in penetrating others' lies, due in part perhaps to the ubiquity of such lies in reality television shows and in everyday life, and thus induced a cynical attitude of "real or not, it does not matter." In this sense, a study of reality television is a pertinent part of the research in everyday life, especially when everyday life is to a certain extent a fusion of performance and genuine reaction.

These twists have posed obstacles to define Chinese reality television as a specific genre of television program, but rather as a multi-media cultural phenomenon. Even though in the Chinese context, the phrase "reality television" has almost become a colloquial term used to describe a vaguely defined group of television programs, the term itself has lost the references to the television genre. For the purpose of mapping the discursive field of how reality televisions are being discussed within the Chinese contexts, I offer a few anchors commonly used in Chinese reality television studies. A usually way to classify reality television would be from the producer's point of view: Chunyu has elaborated on the classification of reality television as a combination of elements, such as competitions with rules, real people from everyday life, and incentives such as rewards. If this classification is sufficient in helping to sort out the distinctive characteristics of reality television, a wide range of television programs, including various game shows (e.g., "Survivor"), talent shows (e.g., "American Idol"), dating shows (e.g., the British show "Take Me Out"), quiz shows (e.g., "Millionaire"), career shows (e.g., "Master Chief" and "Apprentice"), meet this based on the combination of formats they use. For example, in the "Apprentice," the New York real estate magnate Donald Trump recruits sixteen ordinary clerks, small business owners, and lawyers, among others, and makes them compete for the position of being his apprentice, which means the winner of the competition (which is actually a 14-week job interview) will become the head of one of Trump's companies. The rules of the game are simple: people from the losing team will be fired by Trump, and the rest remain. Whoever remains at the end is the winner. The format of this show is distinct from dating shows and game shows, but the basic rules and the element of competing for a prize are the same. The

competition setting itself is a set-up for drama in an everyday social scenario. The artificial construction of this drama is hidden by the rules of the game, in which the politics of power is the underlying theme. In this sense, reality television does capture the “reality” of how the programs are constructed within certain social frameworks as well as reflect the power struggles implied in the drama.

Reality television is capable of synchronizing the effects of all the political, economic, and cultural factors into the participants’ actions and becoming a powerful reconstruction of the social environment from which it emerges. In addition, the impact of reality television is visible through the media coverage of reality television programs and references made to them during our daily conversations and in online forums. Reality television cannot be ignored in its attempt to grasp what is happening in the political, economic, and cultural life of an urban dweller, because it reflects, expresses, and sometimes even criticizes the reality urban populations are now facing.

The purpose of this thesis is to uncover the stories that reality television tells about urban lives. In other words, reality television is about the stories we tell ourselves concerning the life we live, those that we are told to tell, and those that we aspire to tell. Reality television shows reflect the aspirations and ideas about urban lives. Sometimes it is even about the stories we choose to pretend to believe as real. It is the twist of “as if” that is made so real in these shows. When the storytellers of the reality television shows are participants portraying daily encounters in their city lives, the close proximity between the participants and the stories told create a sense that the audiences themselves are the storytellers. In this sense, the flow of reality television is actually purposive rather than accidental. It is exactly for this reason that the social construction of reality television shows makes them important in understanding the mental city landscape from which they have emerged. The governmental imperatives of control, the economic imperatives of the television companies’ shareholders, and the audiences’ pleasures and catharsis in watching reality television are the forces that construct the content of reality television. Reality television is a component of the environment from which it emerges, which is so complicated itself that studying reality television should reveal a more accurate interpretation of that environment.

More urgently, what needs to be investigated in this thesis is how certain stories are told and why they are told. Reality television provides fertile ground



for understanding the urban population's mentality and its interactions in a political-economic context. The word "urban" in China is characterized by changes, that is, the constant state of becoming rather than being. Thus, the transient moments captured by reality television could provide a more accurate account of the sources of becoming than any attempted comprehensive mapping of the whole urbanization process. Instead of trying to define what urban is or the problems of urbanization, I intend to provide some perspectives in understanding the movements in the process.

#### 4. *Overview of the Thesis*

Chapter 1 reviews the studies on reality television produced in the West and in China. This comparative approach aimed to reveal the different aspects that have been especially important in the context of their respective research subjects: the studies produced in China have focused predominantly on the political economy of reality television, whereas those produced in the West cover more diverse topics. By way of reviewing the studies on reality television, this chapter offers the genealogy of the development of reality television in China, as correlated to the changing economic and political environment in the process of urbanization, highlighting the potential of using reality television to investigate the imaginations of the urban future. This chapter also explores the landscape in which reality television has been discussed and what discourses are dominant in academic discussions.

The literature review is followed by a theoretical critique on how reality television can be studied, considering complex fields of forces that shape the form and the content of the shows. In search of a method that grasps the dynamics of collaborating and contesting forces, I explored Foucault's theoretical enterprise revolving around governmentality, especially the concept of *dispositif*, which provides framework and method to treat discourses as dispersed mechanisms of power-effacement. This concept is used in developing his project on "bio-politics", the micro-politics take effect through monitoring and recreating bodies according to the cause of productive power. I borrowed from Foucault's project the framework of *dispositif* (as a way of power-deployment and effacement) and use

its method to study the production of the imageries of urban lives, because the framework is effective in analyzing the specific devices of reality television as heterogeneous organs for power dispersion and deployment.

Of particular concern in this thesis is how discourses are organized to produce and constrain imageries and practices of urban living in reality television shows. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 all begin by exploring the discourses that form the representations and expressions of urban lives on different levels. While Chapter 2 focuses on the imageries of urban living (i.e. discourse on space and time), Chapters 3 (i.e. discourse on knowledge) and Chapter 4 (i.e. discourse on morality) both concentrate on the practices and ethics of living an urban life. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 elaborate on the often ignored aspects of the reality televisions – ignored because the contents including the discourses on space-time and knowledge have not invoked controversies. But the uniformity and coherency of these discourses reveal the structure of a way of life that is necessary for the elaboration on the more controversial and more widely discussed discourse on morality that will be dealt with in Chapter 4. These three identified dimensions of discourses (discourses on space and time, knowledge, and morality) constitute the predominant theme of building a future urban life without being made explicit in the “branding strategy” of “happiness/wellbeing” and “feelings/emotions”. Though these discourses do not cover every single aspects of living in urban China, they provide a framework on which everyday practices can be built onto. The analysis on these discourses form the axes of the thesis, leading to a concluding discussion on urban reality re-imagined and reproduced in reality television shows. The three discourses each present a distinct aspect of living in cities, but without being disparate, as these distinguished aspects are wired into an inter-textual connectivity, each supporting another to strengthen local population control.

Each of the chapters 2, 3, and 4 stands on its own as an analysis of one of the defining structures on which urban lives are built. In each chapter, I collected texts from the same reality television shows aired on JSTV. I also analyzed the categorization of discourses produced and assessed the political implications of the discourses. Texts were collected from all five reality television programs – “*Feicheng-Wurao*” (dating show 非诚勿扰), “*Fei Dei Will Watch*” (game show

非常了得), “*Yizhan-Daodi*” (quiz show 一站到底), “*Tuoyingerchu*” (career show 脱颖而出), and “*Raid the Cage*” (game-quiz show 芝麻开门), all broadcasted during the late-night period – produced by JSTV. Narratives, comments, and other non-discursive elements were collected and analyzed by three not mutually exclusive categories: discourse on space and time, discourse on knowledge, and discourse on morality. Episodes that have drawn heated discussions or controversies, special events related to these reality television shows, and five random episodes of each show were surveyed to form the main dataset for the analysis. It is not without limitations that the three dimensions of the discourses on urbanism are treated separately in the three individual chapters, because the dataset for each chapter necessarily overlaps and certain important texts were placed in different chapters. These three dimensions do not necessarily cover all the texts of the reality television shows due to the limitation of the data collection process. Since the study’s aim is to capture significant moments rather than an all-around view of urbanism in China, the dimensions of morality, knowledge, and space and time should suffice to map the essential ideas and imaginations of urbanism.

Chapter 2 opens with an outline of the spatio-temporal specificities of JSTV, that is, the context of reality television production. The spatio-temporal specificities of the production context are juxtaposed with the discourse on space and time produced in the content of the reality television shows, hinting at the political situation of the productions of the discourses on urbanization and urbanism. The importance of space and time as the framework for how living can be imagined is highlighted by two short theses on space and time: We live in a place-saturated world where no life can be imagined and lived without turning “empty” space into places, which highlights questions about what space is turned into which kinds of places and how. The notion of time must also be problematized, because the experiences of time in both the actualized and the “virtual” sense are different from the dominating neo-liberal concept of linear-progressive time. I argue that there is a curious interplay between the two (space and time) and the centrality of the narrative is based on building places from interior space expressed in the future tense. The exterior space is absent from the discourses, while the past-present tense is vaguely conveyed as an accumulation

toward the future. The interplay is an essential assemblage that conditions the expressions and imaginations of city lifestyles, highlighting an individualistic and linear developmental view of life.

Chapter 3 turns to another powerful yet more hidden discourse that constructs our understanding of urban lives: the discourse on knowledge. The discourse on space and time does not exist in isolation but, rather, it is supported by a range of other discourses that legitimize its usage: the legitimization of the individualistic and linear developmental framework for imagining urban living. The discourse on knowledge and the process of its productions enacts and sometimes mobilizes the population to enter into entertaining such discourse in the practices of their everyday lives. This chapter addresses the question about what is regarded as knowledge, directing the analysis toward the power struggle in the urbanization process in China. In the reality television shows, I recognized three categories of knowledge, parallel to each other: “book smart,” the knowledge one acquires through formal education, with an emphasis on memorizing as knowing (*shuben zhishi* 书本知识); “street smart,” the knowledge about society and life, usually referred to as “experiences of life” (*shenghuo jingyan* 生活经验); and knowledge about oneself (*zizhi* 自知), the self-awareness of the social situation one is in and the correct estimation of one’s capability, which is associated with being realistic and pragmatic. In the structure of knowledge as such, what practices are normalized and what practices are estranged? As a way to draw boundaries and set standards, the discourse on knowledge further divides, mobilizes, and controls the population in instances such as the reinforcement of the prestige of state education, normalized discrimination against rural-to-urban immigration, and the new liberal developmental path.

Chapter 4 synthesizes the previous chapters with an overview of the issues related to individual actions in situations where moral judgments are called for. Moral education is an often discussed issue associated with reality television in China. Reality television shows have shifted from an earlier pedagogical model of television focused on social responsibility and the building of communities and neighborhoods to an overtly individualistic approach to life in cities. Chapter 4 outlines the change in discursive formations on self-driven individual posit as

opposite to family ethics. The dynamics in the making of the discourse, the interactions between the criticism from the press and online, and the changes of discourse in reality television will be elaborated to explicate the force relationships behind. In fact, the apparent debates on and conflicts over moral actions that have been triggered by reality television shows aired on JSTV actually serve as a device to neutralize opinions and in a way formulate a homogeneous code of conduct in accordance with the existing mainstream moral discourses sanctioned by the central government, hence the question about how heterogeneous opinions are unified through reality television to create a homogeneous set of discourses on moral conduct that is possible in reality television shows, how disharmonizing discourses are absorbed or commercialized, and how this process of absorption functions to install orders or controls on the population. I also looked into particular and “notorious” cases in the range of reality television shows, in conjunction with the previous chapters on the frameworks of imagining urban living, to interrogate whether such discourses contribute to mitigating discontent and anxiety inherent in urban lives.

The thesis is an attempt to bring into discussions ignored aspects of popular television culture that can be potential source for furthering the understanding of urban conditions in China. By the end of the thesis, I will conclude by reviewing how these chapters on different dimensions of urbanism discourses are related to each other and forged into one framework of urbanism as a way of living in contemporary China.

## Chapter 1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 1. Literature Review

#### Reality Television Studies in the West

The focus of this section is a discussion on theories and methods, summarizing relevant studies that have integrated the theoretical frameworks I will discuss later in this chapter. Because of the diversity within the genre of reality television and the different focuses of the studies, I have selected researches especially pertinent to illuminating the structures of power relations embedded in reality television, including, for instance, political-economic and ideological frameworks.

A few studies on North American and British reality television shows have provided successful examples of how the investigation of forces and power relations can be executed. For instance, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay identify that the pedagogical purpose of citizenship-making is an important logic behind reality television (134–142). Make-over shows, especially those made during the aftermath of the financial tsunami in the U.S., are a sub-category of reality television that refers to an orientation toward the virtues of self-responsibility, life improvement, and pleasure, which reflects the new image of a responsible citizen of a nation in economic crisis. In another paper by Hay, he explains how reality television shows during that period were shaped by the forces of overcoming a financial crisis, through the building of what he called the “moral economy” of self-responsibilization (382–402). The term “moral economy” is not new. Skeggs used the phrase to describe how classes are produced through self-performance in reality television shows, while focusing more on the implantation of the governmentality mechanism of reality television, that is, the mechanism of the “many watching the many.”<sup>10</sup> The participants in the reality television shows enter

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<sup>10</sup> “Many watching the many” is Skeggs’ version of Foucault’s panoptical governance of “the few watching the many.” See Skeggs, Beverley. The moral economy of person production: the class relations of self-performance on ‘reality’ television, *The Sociological Review*, 57 (4). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009, 626–644.

a value-loaded setting in a television studio and present good and bad images through their self-performances. Though not made explicit, Skeggs' analysis shows that reality television is a field of forces, predominantly with class ideology, that compels certain performances from the participants.

In this study of Skeggs, in which the audience (particularly the British lower-middle class) was seen as vulnerable to the victimization and ridicule of the television programs, she returns to the model of ideology, long after the "interpretive turn" in media research, which typically sees the audience as active and the text as open and polysemic (Evans 147–168). Such a turn is seen in John Fiske's *Television Culture*, Ien Ang's *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, and David Motley's *Television, Audiences and Culture Studies*, all of which recognize the subjectivity of the audience and the multiple viewing behaviors and meanings that can exist within one subject. Skeggs' return to ideology alarms the field of television audience study and cautions the search for polysemic reading of television texts. Hence in studying reality television, special attention should be paid to exploring which sites allow the production of counter-discourses, because reality television encompasses different platforms and different viewing activities all rolled into one. For this reason, proper context has to be added to explicate the intricacies behind reality television. This context should include how the content, meanings, and discourses are produced and circulated in the cultural sphere. For example, if reality television's influence is spread through inter-textual relationships with other media products, such as tabloids, blog commentaries, cross-referencing of other television products, and so on, the text of reality television has to be understood through the inter-textual analysis of the symbolic environments. In the current study, I will integrate this inter-textual relationship into the discussion on the processes of creating discourses.

One example in highlighting the impacts of the changing technological environment on power distribution in the making and viewing of reality television is Andrejevic's work *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. In this book, Andrejevic takes into account the broader cultural context of consumerism and capitalism in which reality television has been developing, as he calls for "a critical evaluation of the ostensibly revolutionary potential of new media is to demonstrate how dramatic transformations are absorbed by existing social relations *without* revolutionizing them" (15). With insights from in-depth

interviews with television producers, participants, and viewers, Andrejevic exemplified the increasing demand for “realness” in reality television, the welcomed illusions of being connected and involved through the democratizing technology of the Internet and the increasing surveillance imperative which draws the forces of “market economy” together (143). His arguments have led to a distrustful view of the new formats and new technologies featured in current reality television shows. Even savvy viewers who think they can penetrate the content of the reality television shows and be involved in the production of these shows are confined in a more deceptive way by the illusion of being part of the process instead of being part of the result (Andrejevic 132–136). His understanding of reality television and its interactive platforms as phenomena confirms the validity of the studies on forces which configure the reality of viewing and that of the reality – just that when the format of reality television is transplanted in urban China, the forces will also include the authoritative imperatives of the government and the flagship of the *mainstream* culture alongside with the new technology and the market economy factors.

### Reality Television Studies in China

The approaches and perspectives used in reality television studies in the West cannot be universally applicable, taking into consideration the differences in their political-economic context. Television studies in China have revealed the official frameworks that constrain both production and reception. The discourse on political constraints has become a main reference for academic discussions on reality television. Though the constraints are felt by television producers in many aspects, politics and entertainment are two parallel references in the media discourses (partly due to the market imperative). Xian Zhou and Kang Liu called these parallel references “dualism” in the media (16), while Duo, in a more pro-government stance, stated that “entertainment television as a tool for national security is one of the most distinct features of Chinese characteristics” (206). How did these dual forces (i.e., entertainment and education) come into being? On what field do the two forces negotiate if they are not always parallel? Many studies on the impact of reality television take the perspective of the technical level of



making reality television shows and their negotiation “strategies” with the central government. On a technical level, the focus is on the creativity of the format, the features, and the process of production. These academic positions show that reality television has been recognized as a revolutionary format that needs attention because of its vast impact on television production in the future, as well as its impact on moral doctrines. The tension in negotiation is between the marketability of the reality television shows’ content, which includes entertainment elements of ridiculing or featuring the “dark side” of human nature, and the instrumentality of the provincial-level satellite television channel as a representative of mainstream media and a leader in moral tone. Having described the discursive field of reality television studies in China, I will next summarize the studies with a brief genealogy of the development of reality television in China.

The first reality television show in China, “*Shengcun-Daidiaozhan*” (生存大挑战, “Big Challenge to Survival”<sup>11</sup>), produced by a provincial-level network in Guangdong in 1996, was more like a documentary of three college students who tried to travel and survive for four month on only 4000 RMB. According to Georgette Wang, “*Shengcun-Daidiaozhan*” incorporated a similar format of competition used in the American show “Survivor” just four years after that reality show began (132). A similar format of competition for survival was soon a feature of several other shows. However, Wang argues that the format contradicted the Confucius teaching of humility and harmony. This led to the question of how much competition should be allowed. The format of reality television drew the attention of the central government as early as in 2001, when a conference was held so that the media sector, the government, and higher education institutions could exchange views on the “potential” and the “danger” of reality television (Ma).<sup>12</sup> The conference was a model for the China Central Television (CCTV)-guided<sup>13</sup> program “*Zouru-Xianggelila*” (走入香格里拉, “Into Shangri-La”), a program that imitate the format of *Survivor*, but had more resemblance to a documentary with a mainstream moral value tone than a reality television show focused on revealing the “dark side” of people. The exemplar

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<sup>11</sup> See the English title of this show adopted by Georgette Wang (132).

<sup>12</sup> On November 15, 2001, a conference about reality television in China was held at the CCTV station conference room.

<sup>13</sup> This television program, though not directed and produced by CCTV, was supervised by CCTV’s guidance.

program, however, did not achieve flagship status because it was successful mainly on only one provincial-level channel, Hunan Economic Channel, according to the evidence provided by Ruxue Ran and Jing Wu.

Even more ironic, as reality television continued to develop, only the actual format of competition survived the competition reality shows in the television industry. The competition format was first made popular by Hunan Satellite TV, a provincial-level communications company under the parent company Golden Eagle Group, exemplified by the financial success of the show “SuperGirl Voice.” A range of singing and acting contests followed in its path in 2007. In this talent show format, public opinions are centered on the promoted consumerism logic and the possibility of “grass-roots” (*caogen* 草根) democracy in the competition (Cui; Gu; Xiaoyu Wang; Jinglin Xu), as opposed to the official discourse on the overflow of low-quality and low aesthetic value content. However, to follow the 2007 restrictions on audience voting (that was then seen as the main method of audience participation) mandated by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), the theme of contestant competition was fitted into a larger framework of promoting the perseverance of “dream-chasing,” industriousness, and determination. This was both a negotiation and a neutralization of public opinion and official discourses. This neutralization process, which took place on a constructed inter-textual discursive field (i.e., online websites and forums and the television programs that followed up on the talent shows), was a result of the ludicrous business of this genre of television and its continuous commercialization.

The format of competition took a new turn in 2010, when Jiangsu Satellite TV (JSTV) hit a new high in viewers’ ratings for its dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*” (非诚勿扰).<sup>14</sup> In addition to the competition format, the program incorporated more game elements that highlighted the conflict between different values and behaviors in society. As identified by Dan Li, these included the elements of a high gender ratio (24 females to 1 male), fast decision-making, and a short turnover-period (15 minutes per introduction of a new participant) to keep audiences engaged. The show’s popularity surged in 2010 when it featured

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<sup>14</sup> This show has also been referred to as “If You Are the One,” which happens to be the title of a popular love movie in China. In this paper, I will use the pinyin of the show “*Feicheng-Wurao*,” which literally translates as “Don’t Bother if Not Sincere” to denote this program.

conflicting views on the issues of income, class, and marriage, including the notorious statement of “crying in a BMW,” among others. The slogan of the program also reflected its focus: “Welcome to the *new-style* dating program (*Huanying shoukan xinpai jiaoyoujiemu*).” The newness of the “new-style” (*xinpai*) in dating was understood as a feminist’s position on the roles women play in dating and marriage (Chang; Dan Li; Yinhe Li), marking a change in views on marriage from the parental supervision model<sup>15</sup> to what is called “my love is my choice” (我的爱情我做主, “*wode aiqing wo zuozhu*”).<sup>16</sup> The female participants’ responsibility to “choose” was the selling point of the program. The aggressive marketing strategies were met with a mixture of enthusiasm, worries, and even condemnations. However, the later development of reality television revealed that the “feminist position” was a compromised one. The economic imperative in the television industry propelled more satellite channels to invest in creating similar programs to increase viewers’ ratings. More dating shows, some talk shows, and a career show followed, all with the same format and similar rules of the dating show.

The changes in formats of television programs have repeatedly marked changes in society: “*Xinwen Diaocha*” (“News Probe” 新闻调查) in 1996 and a similar program from a feminist perspective “*Ban-bian-tian*” (“Half the Sky” 半边天),<sup>17</sup> both on CCTV, were pioneers in providing authentic reports on social issues of public concern, without having a straightforward pedagogical tone. As an innovation of form by the central government, “News Probe” remains to this day the only in-depth television reporting program on CCTV, serving as both a model for investigative journalism and a mouthpiece of the government on controversial social issues. It is what Hao calls “the voice of the intellectuals co-opted into the media system” (194), supported by SARFT. Similar programs flourished, including “*Shihua shi-shuo*” (“Tell It as It Is” 实话实说), “*Dongfang-Shikong*” (“Time and Space in the East” 东方时空), “*Jinri Shuofa*” (“Law Today”

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<sup>15</sup> Here, the phrase “parental supervision” denotes a slightly different model from the parental arrangement of marriage that prevailed in rural areas of contemporary China before modernization. The “supervision” of the parents on the choice of dating partners means that consultations with parents and relatives are expected.

<sup>16</sup> “*Wode Aiqing Wo Zuozhu*” is the title of several popular Internet literatures, and it was adopted by the popular television series “My Youthfulness” in 2009.

<sup>17</sup> See TV producer is from a new breed of woman, *The New York Times*, September 28, 1999, 12.

今日说法), and “*Jiaodian-Fangtan*” (“The Focused Interviews” 焦点访谈).<sup>18</sup> The social realism aesthetics of the talk show/investigative journalism in China provided the base for the later development of reality television. The continuity in style and format suggests that reality television could have begun as a metamorphosed form of investigative journalism. These changes were the result of the aggressive pursuit of commercial interests by the provincial-level satellite television networks.

In the years that followed, new experiments with television program formats appeared after SARFT’s policies began to encourage the diversification of television programs. These changes have led to reality television attracting the most attention by virtue of its innovative formats. To capture these changes in formats in a lucid way, Liu Xishi, recognized four stages of development: stage one, celebrity and performance, in which celebrities and the quality of the performance are the most important elements; stage two, celebrity and game, which fills the gap between the population’s need for varied programs and the dominating tone of teaching; stage three, game and knowledge, which stresses the “gain” of knowledge along with entertainment; and stage four, ordinary people and shows, which refers to reality television as viewed in this thesis (49-50). What Liu successfully illustrates is that the seemingly inevitable success of reality television can be explained by the historical stages from which this genre has learned to balance entertainment, social concerns, and education.

Nevertheless, “all about entertainment” has taken over the other two conditions, becoming the only prominent discourse in discussing reality television. One reason for this is entertainment is the only targetable point for criticism if the prosperity of reality television needs to be curbed. Indeed, this is what happened in the later stages of reality television. The “pan-entertainment” trend in this development soon become the target of the press and academic investigations, which condemned the elements of ridicule, overexposed sexuality, and materialistic world views (Xiaomei Han 115-116; Xishi Liu 49-50; Ling Zhang 73-74), as well as other forces such as concerned Internet bloggers and the government. Attacks were also directed at the inauthenticity of the shows, such as the staged acts that featured conflicts, resulting in regulations issued by SARFT

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<sup>18</sup> Translations of the program title are adopted from Hao Zhidong (194–195).

stating that “reality television cannot fake the information about the participants and cheat the audience” and “reality television programs are not allowed to use the theme of dating as a way to ridicule or abase others, to openly discuss indecent materials, to promote materialistic and unhealthy views of marriage and family life” (Dan Li 130). SARFT reacted quickly in 2010 to redefine the role of television and to direct its discourse to “responsibilities.”

While most critiques with a prescriptive understanding of reality television as mere entertainment have remained more factual and rich in context, although less analytical and explanatory, some authors have focused on the mechanisms of reality dating shows to decipher the entanglement of power struggles behind the scenes. Qun Zhang and Chang Shu contributed an analysis of the “entertainment” elements enabled by the advances in audio-visual technology, suggesting that these “entertainment-oriented” technologies are also often used to provide other effects (37-39). This suggests that although entertainment seems to be dominant in all programs, other responsibilities of television, such as service and education, are also in place. Wenjie Wang embraced the “local adaptations” of reality television shows, arguing for the value of the “reproduction” of the same entertainment materials found in the West, which also caters to expectations for the function of “services,” such as solving the problem of unemployment and connecting single people in want of a date.

From a different perspective, Li Zhaofeng argues that the “pan-entertainment” trend is the new era for reality television in China, indicating the spread of reality television elements in all programs. Li focuses on the positive aspects of “pan-entertainment” and argues that it is just one facet in the more interactive relationship between the producer and the receiver.<sup>19</sup> In a similar tone, Chunyun Chen highlights that even with all the artificial/inauthentic elements in these shows, reality television in a sense is the most candid reflection of the society in which we live. The programs are honest because they show a surface with ruptures and fissures that give way to occasional eruptions of certain social issues. As Xian Zhou and Kang Liu have argued, though the “pan-entertainment” trend does reflect an apolitical attitude or humorous responses to acute social problems, the dynamics will surface and “explode/erupt” when a media event

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<sup>19</sup> Zhaofeng Li’s words can be translated as “the producer, the participant and the audience are one in the same.”

triggers the “energy” (16). The fraud, the drama, and the conflict in reality television are received critically and reflectively, so that the peaceful surface of the television scenes are ruptured by occasional emotional outbursts. SARFT’s regulations intended to curb reality television; instead, they became an obstacle, resulting only in the breakdown of the “honest mirror” of reality (Zhou and Liu 17). The effect of these regulations has been the elimination of public discussions on acute social problems in entertainment programs. The sequel of “SuperGirl Voice”, “Super Boy” was permitted to be broadcast under the strict mandates of SARFT, eliminating the element of audience voting and the broadcast of fan activities<sup>20</sup>. The censorship on *Feicheng-Wurao* in 2010, discussions on issues such as housing, income, and unemployment were cut from the reality television shows produced by Jiangsu Satellite TV. However, I speculate that the absence of the discussions on social issues on a discursive level does not mean a complete erasure of these discussions; on the contrary, these concerns became more actively involved, yet hidden, in the discourses on other issues. Further studies of such a “pan-entertainment” trend require attention on how the tension in publicizing thorny social issues transfers to subtle ways of expression through reality television.

## 2. Critique

The widely recognized “dualism” of the authoritarian imperative and the market imperative (i.e., politics and entertainment) is the main framework in the studies on Chinese reality television shows. What seems to be missing is a discussion on the extent of negotiation and competition between these two imperatives, as opposed to the extent of their collaboration and balance – the missing link that is fundamental in understanding the power deployment in television in China. Several reasons may account for this missing discussion. First, the dynamics of market and government imperatives draw the most attention, not only to cultural forms but also to the political-economic context in the television

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<sup>20</sup> This regulation, issued on 26 July, 2007 by SARFT is a regulation document designed to “correct the mistakes and the negative social impact of ‘SuperGirl Voice’”. See <http://www.sarft.gov.cn/articles/2007/07/26/20070914162110700414.html>. Last accessed on 23 March, 2014.

industry, which is informative to the end-users in most research. Yet critical studies on the more complex mechanisms through which media in China is run are less available because these studies fall outside the realm that is instructive to investors and media practitioners. Second, the dualistic model of market-government explains with simplicity and clarity the paradoxical phenomena in media, such as arbitrary regulations by SARFT and inconsistent program content on television. What the dualistic view fails to account for is the multiple forces that have taken shape in the profit and market-oriented strategies. The simplicity in equating the instrumental role played by television to the government regulations on media practices and the political economy of the television industry reduces the complexity of how the instrumental functions are deployed through different mechanisms directly and indirectly related to government control. As I will attempt to show in this thesis, television is a container for the mechanisms of the distributing forces at the micro-level in everyday life, synthesizing the political economy with the narratives, imageries, and formats of reality television.

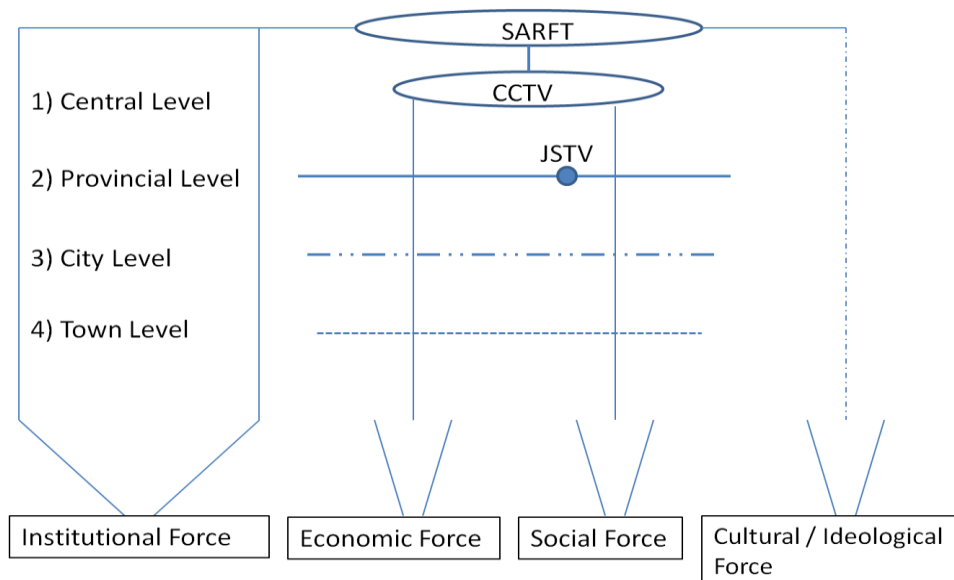
With an eye toward the synthesizing effects of television, I propose to probe into a theoretical construction that might illuminate the mechanisms of reality television as an entity containing the organs of forces that as a whole are instrumental, hopefully revising the dualistic paradigm in viewing Chinese media. This probing will attempt to view the different elements of reality television as constituents to a mechanism of power distribution dispersed through narratives, imageries, interactive platforms, and the historical development of popular reality television through the reality television shows of a renowned provincial-level network. This implies that the apparently contesting market and government imperatives will actually collide through this mechanism to furtively construct a coherent urbanism. Further research could include the logical and infiltrating forces of such urbanism. The theoretical frameworks guiding the current research are in line with such probing.

### *3. Theoretical Frameworks*

If reality television, as we have seen from the many examples, has come to the point of “real or not, it does not matter” (Huff 167), then the studies on reality

television become that much more important in proving that television is vulnerable to the manipulations and constructions of different forces. Therefore, it is important to investigate how television programs are manipulated and shaped. In this sense, the study of reality television is the study of the forces in play, which may include economic groups, political institutions, social classes and their behaviors, spatio-temporal arrangements, and the social media environment, among many other forces. (Diagram 2)

Diagram 2 An Incomplete Diagram of Forces of the Making of JSTV's Reality Televisions



This recognition that reality television is more than a mere product of the institution by which it is produced, as it is a compound of the multiple forces that shape it, is equally important to television studies in a Chinese context and in a Western context. In the West, the patterns of production in reality television have overcome the model of hegemony, since “capitalism (in which the media products are produced) [is] precisely built upon fluidity, open identities and indeterminacy” (Thoburn 81). The study of reality television has to reflect the framework of production, which is rooted in capitalist dynamics, without sacrificing the complexity of the social. What also needs to be clarified is that the cultural products cannot be viewed just as a representation of social complexity, for the



very nature of television programs in an audio-visual-dominated cultural sphere is to affect:

Affect is a key dimension of experience in information- and image-based capitalist cultures, and one that most clearly marks the movement of cultural studies away from a conception of culture as signifying practice (Thoburn 84).

Culture is part of our practices and experiences, which is actualized only through the affects they created. Viewed in this light, reality television is a matter of the affects and the forces behind the affects, which naturally demands a Deleuzian perspective in culture studies:

...a certain collective exhaustion of structuralist (post- and otherwise) trajectories – can perhaps best be glimpsed in a revived emphasis upon such matters as: process, sensation and affect, movement and transition, rhythm, creativity, imagination, the connection of ethics and aesthetics, the virtual, expressive totality (the ‘whole’), ‘forces’ of life (vitalism), the lived or experience[d], bios, and non-human materiality, or what might be understood, quasi-collectively, as a renewed attention to ‘empiricism’ (Seigworth 109).

In this thesis, it is assumed that the subjects are an open field to affects and a body to affect provides a possibility of understanding how the context gives specific meanings to the analysis, which will help the analysis transcend the mere layout of the cultural-political background. Backgrounds will then become the subject of the investigation, for backgrounds are where the forces and affects emerge.

From this perspective, the question remaining is how to view the various forces interacting in the field of reality television. I found Foucault’s concepts on power and governmentality to be a useful and comprehensive demonstration. I am aware that theoretical frameworks have been developed in the close field of sociology that can be instrumental in illuminating some aspects of urbanism that I plan to discuss in this thesis, including the works from symbolic integrationists’ perspective on knowledge construction, from which, according to Reiner Keller, Foucault’s own work on knowledge has triggered little reply (47). However, the emphasis on power struggles and later on power deployment, which is the central question in Foucault’s work, makes Foucault’s approach to discourse and power

more suited for this study, because such concepts grasp not only the institutional power effacement but also micro-politics.

In Foucault's earlier works, he casts initial doubt on individual experiences, which is replaced with "ontological schema, in which *discourse* – now occupying the same position formerly reserved for 'language' or Being – modified itself incrementally over time, thereby giving rise to discrete *subjectival positions*" (Paras 24–25). Foucault says,

...in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality ("The Order of Discourse" 52).

Foucault continues the discussion on the division of the exclusion/inclusion function of discourses. Central to his method is the historical investigation of discourses and other non-discursive forms, which is seen in his work on governmentality – the arrangement of power partly relying on the actualized forms of discourses. In one of his interviews for his book *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault confesses that the publication of the book is meant to revise his previous theory on discourse, which is developed under the paradigm of the "judicial-philosophical" (Foucault, *Power-Knowledge* 187) approach to defining power and discourse. However, I see continuity instead of a rupture in his research: discourse has continued to be used as a tool of power in his later works, just as in his earlier ones, though later Foucault focused more on the discourse of knowledge in the areas of madness and sexuality than on the discourse of the judicial. That is, he expands the arena of discourse analysis, revises his theory that power is mainly maintained through judicial discourses in a top-down manner, and elaborates through his case of sexuality knowledge to explain a rather "bottom-up" way of power deployment. Foucault also emphasizes his change of view on the function of discourse, stating, "So I should be only too glad to discard everything in *The Order of Discourse* which might seem to identify the relations of power to discourse with negative mechanisms of selection" (*Power-Knowledge*: 184). In other words, he means that discourses are not just mechanisms of power to include/exclude.

As rightly pointed out by Keller, “Foucault’s chief merit is to have brought awareness to the materiality of social signs and idea production, that is, to their concrete manifestations in practices, institutional structures, objects, and textual documents” (51). Largely inspired by Foucault’s approach to discourse in this sense, I recognize that the main twist of reality television is its outwardly performative dimension of delivering and constructing discourses. The more dynamic process of power affection is the actualization of power directly on the subject’s body through many channels. That is, power could be deployed “bottom-up.”

To describe this bottom-up or dispersed power deployment, Foucault elaborates on two types of governmentality: the panopticon model, where the few watches the many, and the apparatus (*dispositif*) model, where “heterogeneous organs” of a system work together to form a subject (Foucault, *Power* 194). In the panopticon model, the individuals are passively “placed, moved and articulated on others” (*Punishment and Discipline* 184), with the body rendered docile by “the system of command” (*Punishment and Discipline* 196). The panoptic schema recognizes the predominant position of observers who carry out surveillance through the subjects’ awareness of being observed and being always within the range of the surveillance, “making it [the exercise of power] lighter, more rapid, more effective” (*Punishment and Discipline* 209)<sup>21</sup>. If we do not read Foucault’s panoptic prison literally,<sup>22</sup> this surveillance theory is apposite in the enquiry on reality television, since reality television is essentially people watching other people. The participants of reality televisions act with the awareness that their behaviors are always subject to the observation of the audiences, thus creating the possible condition for active and effective self-discipline. However, taking into account the increased effects of the fans’ power and the pleasure consumption that prevails in popular culture products such as reality television, according to Elmer,

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<sup>21</sup> Foucault discusses panopticism as way of disciplinary mechanism contrary to the enclosure type or the negative way of discipline, such as physical punishment as deterrence. These he calls the “two images of discipline” (*Punishment and Discipline* 209). He recognizes the novelty in the modern panoptic machine of surveillance which make the subject being disciplined to become active, i.e. self-discipline.

<sup>22</sup> In fact, *Punishment and Discipline* does stem from a literal experience of how prisons work and is a record of Foucault’s own experiences when he interacted with prisoners and the practices in prisons. See Foucault, Michel. *Politics, philosophy, culture: interviews and other writings 1977–1984*. Ed. Lawrence Kritzman, Trans. Alan Sheridan et al. New York and London: Routledge, 1990, 100–101.

the framework seems to lose its strength in grasping the power relationship that is complicated by the de-centered and networked aspects of culture circulation (232). This limitation has been recognized by Foucault. Foucault talked about his intentions when he started writing *History of Sexuality* after finishing *Punishment and Discipline*:

In my studies of madness or the prison, it seemed to me that the question at the center of everything was: what is power? And, to be more specific how is it exercised, what exactly happens when someone exercises power over another? It seemed to me then that sexuality, in so far as it is, in every society, and in ours in particular, heavily regulated, was a good area to test what the mechanism[s] of power actually were. Especially as the analyses that were current during the 1960s defined power in terms of prohibition: *power, it was said, is what prohibits, what prevents people doing something. It seemed to me that power was something much more complex than that*” (emphasis added). (*Politics* 102)

Having realized the restrictions of the panopticon model and the importance of understanding the mechanisms of confinement and the general disciplinarization of society, Foucault devised theories of a more dispersed power apparatus, but in a way different from what Marxists would consider.

This led to Foucault’s conceptualization of the mechanisms of power as *dispositif*, exemplified in *History of Sexuality I*, as decentralized in deployments, which coordinate as organs of one body to form the subject, power in the form of “bio-power,” or simply the “entire political technology of life” (133–159). Different from the State Ideological Apparatus (SIA), Foucault’s apparatus assumes a more dispersed power relationship and emphasizes how the different organs in the power system interact. As he defines the term *dispositif*,

...firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. ...Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus<sup>23</sup> (*dispositif*) is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. ...Thirdly, I understand by the term ‘apparatus (*dispositif*)’ a sort of – shall we say – formation which has as its major function at a given

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<sup>23</sup> The term *dispositif* is sometimes translated as “apparatus”, “deployment” and “device”, or referred to as “diagram”. To keep accurate the meaning of the term, I keep the original word *dispositif* in this thesis so that the original meanings are kept.

historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*. The apparatus (*dispositif*) thus has a dominant strategic function. (*Power* 194 –195)

The differenceS between SIA, panopticism and *dispositif* highlight a distinct feature of reality television that needs to be studied: each force in the making of a reality television show is distinguished yet still in coordination with others to compose a coherent product with a discourse message in it. Such conception of *dispositif* also entails that the forces come from an immanent cause, as in a diagram, which at the same time defines each other and evolves basing on each other, and which will lead to the coherency in its product in the making. As Juniper and Jose identifies, through the lens of Deleuze, that “the abstract machine of the diagram is ‘...like the cause of the concrete assemblages that execute its relations; and these relations between forces take place not above but within the very tissue of the assemblages they produces” (8) In other words, from the elusive language of Deleuze, Juniper and Jose recognizes the *dispositif*, which entails the assembling of heterogeneous organs, is immanent. The force relationships within the *dispositif* presume a de-centered distribution of power behind the making of media products.

In the same vein, with the changes brought by new media to the media landscape, the concept of *dispositif* is seen as especially pertinent in capturing these changes and illuminating on the conditions of producing and viewing of the media products. The “Italian Foucault”, Bifo, who has appropriated Foucault’s concept of *dispositif* into his ideas on resistance and media, suggested in an interview with Mark Coté the thinking of media “as a ‘media dispositif’” which “makes visible its heterogeneity – the discursive, nondiscursive and modes of production and productivity.” (Coté 380) This appropriation echoes with many efforts of utilizing Foucault in the study of media. As in Mark Hansen’s “Foucault and Media: A Missed Encounter?”, the author stresses that “today’s dispersed media would seem to require a more flexible model [of study]” (497) which converges with Foucault on the point of “micropolitics” (497). Similarly and more specifically in film studies, the concept of *dispositif* has also been used in advancing understanding of how cinema has evolved in the new media environment, which Parente and de Carvalho referred to as “cinema as *dispositif*” (50). Though these studies have addressed media in different terms, the idea that

the concept of *dispositif* allows the study of media to focus on the heterogeneous components of media that are reflective of different forces structures is clear.

Therefore, the thesis is an attempt to address media phenomena of JSTV, recognizing them as organic, dynamic and interacting elements of a diagram of forces relationships. It is important to trace the forces that are in play in the formation of reality televisions in China to see how, specifically, the discourse relationships are embedded in the power relationships. (Diagram 2) That is, in Foucault's words, what "urgent needs" (Power 195) do JSTV's reality televisions, as configured *dispositif*, respond to? The other dimension of "bio-politics" is that power is productive and that bodies are materials for power to formulate into a base of production. But to what extent does this apply to the life-serving reality television shows in which the subjects' bodies are disciplined, mobilized, and formulated in line with the economic goal of production? Does this ambitious project of "bio-politics" explain the functions of reality television shows in China?

Another question to bear in mind is that if power is dispersed in a system of apparatus, that is, the very way people are socialized and shaped to display certain behaviors and thinking patterns are not determined by one force or one center of power, how can the system be so air-tight that its delinquencies are always confined? In fact, Foucault himself seemed to be trapped by his own theory on the reactivity of individuals and he struggled to break open the disciplinary system. Deleuze considered Foucault's efforts to seek a way to open up the thesis on the "subject," which Foucault tried to break open through the concept of "subjectification" (Deleuze, *Foucault* 95–97). According to Deleuze, this "subjectification" he observes in Foucault's late theoretical pursuit reflects the recognition of the potential of something not just in individual but rather in something that breaks the paradigm of individual body, thus becoming elusive and going beyond the operation of power. This elusive character, the blindness, of subejctification is what Deleuze summarizes as the power of the "outside", the "exterior" (Deleuze, *Foucault* 71-93) as opposed to the folded-in, the "interior" (Deleuze, *Foucault* 123). Deleuze noticed a "passage" (*Negotiations* 93, 95) in Foucault's works, pushing through the limits set by the concept of "subject," trying to find a third dimension to allow the "passion" of man (*Negotiations* 92). Deleuze defends Foucault's position in *History of Sexuality* against critiques on Foucault's "return to subject":

Finally, in the last books, there is the discovery of thought as a ‘process of subjectification’: it’s stupid to see this as a return to the subject; it is to do with establishing ways of existing or, as Nietzsche put it, inventing new possibilities of life (*Negotiations* 95).

This reflects the high hopes Deleuze saw in Foucault’s thoughts. Is there really such “subjectification” that goes beyond the formation of the subject, which actually is a transcendence of the subject to become a nomad in power himself? The questions for the studies on reality television were again pushed further: Is there a free-floating or a drifting away from the dominate discourses created by reality television, especially with the advent of an interactive medium – namely, the Internet – that “represents a progressive challenge to the top-down, monopolistic mass media” (Andrejevic: 5)? Or, rather, is it just another twist of the system? What is the nature of these transgressions? Does Deleuze’s optimistic interpretation of Foucault stand in the case of Chinese reality television?

Inspired by the Foucaultian way of investigating discourses, this study requires empirical studies on the context and content analysis in support of textual analysis. The empirical data from the government census on television viewing behaviors and data on the industrial structure of the practices employed in making reality television shows will be the sources used to define the issue. The context from which reality television in China emerged cannot be generalized as being the same as in the West, especially with the political structure of the television industry (i.e., the four-level system and the intricate relationship between the television companies and SARFT). The negotiation between the government and the economic imperative of the television companies provides the basic framework in which the production of reality television operates. However, the participants and the audiences do not respond directly to the forces in the industry. Therefore, the content cannot be reduced to a mere reflection of the negotiations mentioned above. Moreover, the production of imaginaries on urban life can be found in the content of the reality shows. To identify what dimensions of urban life are highlighted in the reality television shows, I will use textual analysis as the method to investigate the discourses with which the imaginations of urban life are constructed.

One possible limitation of using texts in the analysis is that the interpretation of the texts and the discourses will not necessarily match the reception of the television shows' content. To strive for understanding the reception of the text will be infinitely more complex than the interpretations I am offering in this thesis, for each text could be received with complicated social factors. This problem is magnified in the study of reality television because of the parallel structure of meaning creations by the interactions of multiple parties, including producers, hosts, participants, and audiences. As explained before, the texts are surfaces shaped by multiple contesting forces. Some forces are materialized by the parties, while other forces remain hidden. Thus, the reality television content itself is already a mixture of reception and production. Having understood the complexity of the television texts themselves and the diversity of the audience groups, I restrained myself to studying the texts. This limitation should not devalue the effort exploring the creation of meanings central to studies on the impact of reality television. The use of three dimensions of discourses in the texts is an effort to overcome the shortcomings of treating them as a whole.

Reality television is said to be about “winning an ideology rather than a defining game characteristic because it seems natural and incontrovertible that the goal of any participant on these shows must be to win” (Kavka 115). This thesis uses the concept of *dispositif* to interrogate and rework the structure of power deployment in reality television in the context of China. Instead of an ideology, as found in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, the assemblage of the discourses on morality, knowledge, and space and time form possible frameworks for imagining urban lives. Because it does not function as a top-down ideology, the assemblage of the discourses work in a more influential way to define essential aspects of the city population's lives, such as kinship, marriage, housing, and employment, among others. In relation to the concerns about urbanism, I will discuss how reality television reflects the reality of developing megacities such as the city of Nanjing (the location of JSTV). In conclusion, I will synthesize the discussion on discourses with the urban studies on China to seek actualization of such discourses in the development of urban lives.



## Chapter 2. The Homogenous Imaginations of Urban Life: Discourses on Space and Time

The Jiangsu Satellite TV channel (JSTV) is constrained by a range of technological, political, and social specificities, which are reflected in the content of their range of reality television shows. The parallels of its context and its content have seldom been examined in the previous studies on the reality shows produced by this channel. However, these parallels, though not usually juxtaposed in similar studies, might be useful in proposing a different and perhaps deeper reading of the content and structure of these reality shows.

In this chapter, I will attempt to show that a structural parallel is in fact the key to understanding how the shows set up mechanisms to define the possibility of certain imaginations of urbanism. I will begin by looking into why these mechanisms have been particular to this channel since 2010. The first section will highlight JSTV in the spatial-temporal setting of contemporary China to help explain the specificities and the success of the reality television shows JSTV produces. In the second section, I will explain how a “future-anterior” tense in a city’s interior becomes the dominant framework for thinking about future life, and why such a framework is specific to the spatial-temporal assemblage of the channel. The parallel of these two sections are intended to show a coupling of the phenomenon of reality television’s emerge and the context of urbanization processes in China. In the second section, the analysis on the framing of space and time will carry the discussion to a more concrete level of how the imaginations of everyday urban life are made articulable and visible through the reality shows produced by JSTV.

### *1. The Space and Time Assemblage of JSTV*

Space and time has been more than once recognized as the fundamental dimension on which structures of power operate, both on the macro level of “state planning” and “institutional mediation of power”<sup>24</sup> and on the micro level of

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<sup>24</sup> Anthony Giddens on time-space relations: “power must be related to the resources that agents employ in the course of their activities in order to accomplish whatever they do. Resources

everyday practice. This section of the chapter will try to delineate on the macro level the power structure through the evolution of the management of space and time behind the success of JSTV.

In the first place, evolutions of communication technologies continue to change the geographical and spatial politics of the media scene in China, shifting the paradigm of measuring the influence of media institutions. Satellite communication technology not only has advanced television programming and broadcasting in China but also has complicated the power struggles among the central, provincial, and local television channels since the late 1980s. The intensity of competition resulting from the new edge of wide coverage and the direct transmission of satellite television has been acutely sensed by the central government: in the official history of television in China, provincial-level satellite television channels are described as having both the strength of nationwide influence and the weakness of being less local (Xiliang Liu 392–406). Inconsistency is discernible in this discourse, as the potential for being more competitive in providing widespread television content is at the same time both a sign of a more robust television industry and a threat to the control of television content. The self-contradicting statement about the capabilities of provincial-level satellite television channels, a trend concurrent with the incorporation of the television industry, reveals tension in the market. The central government blames these provincial channels for superseding CCTV's role as the main provider of nationwide entertainment programs, while most provincial-level networks have struggled to be creative in order to survive under the constraints placed on them by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television's (SARFT) regulations. The spatial dimension that once stabilized the television industry is now being transformed. Unable to adapt to this changing dimension, SARFT has more than once contradicted itself by issuing different policies.

What is certain is that before the central-peripheral conflict intensified in 2007, there had been a period where provincial-level satellite television channels

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implicated in the reproduction of social systems that have some degree of continuity – and thus 'existence' – across space and time form aspects of the structural properties of those social systems... Both resources of power depend in large degree upon the management of time-space relations." (*The Nation-State 7*) Giddens highlights the management of space-time relationship in the construction and operation of social system, for the practice and existence of social system depend on their deployment in space and time.

were given unprecedented freedom to broadcast “apolitical” content. This grant of “freedom” reflected the central government’s eagerness to accommodate these channels, yet with an oversimplified vision of how the television scene was evolving. A few channels thrived during the period of 2000 to 2006, such as Hunan Satellite TV and Zhejiang Satellite TV, whereas Jiangsu Satellite TV (JSTV) was among the less popular, ranking only 20<sup>th</sup> out of the 31 provincial-level satellite television channels. Hunan Satellite TV had been the biggest winner based on the success of “*Kuaile Dabenjing*” (“Happy Camp”, 快乐大本营)<sup>25</sup> in 1996 and “SuperGirl Voice” (超级女声) in 2004. When the show “SuperGirl Voice” reached its peak in 2006, with unsurpassed popularity among Chinese youths throughout the summer of 2006 and an overwhelming RMB0.3 billion in profits just from fans alone (Ru 62), the boom of Hunan Satellite TV ceased to be viewed as “apolitical” and SARFT reacted fiercely. Detailed regulations on language usage, moral messages, and strategies to engage with youths were issued, and all provincial-level (and sub-provincial-level) satellite channels were subjected to these regulations.

A few examples can help illustrate these regulations’ level of concreteness: participants and hosts could not address each other as “jie, ge, di, mei” (sisters and brothers) because of the flirtatious connotations of these personal pronouns; any change of hosts or participants in a program had to be filed with SARFT for approval; the hosts and the participants were forbidden from discussing topics irrelevant to the theme of the show (e.g., singing competitions), especially topics related to the personal lives of the hosts or the participants; and any follow-up activities related to the talent shows were not to be broadcast on satellite channels.<sup>26</sup> The regulations exemplified, above everything else, that SARFT had sensed a challenge from these provincial-level networks in superseding CCTV as the creators of mainstream culture, which resulted in the talent contests and the other talent shows being produced in a strictly professional style and reducing these shows’ capacity to mobilize fans and participants. Even though not all of the articles in the regulations reflected the threat Hunan Satellite TV presented as a political institution, the intensity with which the central government reacted

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<sup>25</sup> Translation by Wikipedia.

<sup>26</sup> My interpretation. For the exact wording of the original documents, please refer to [http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/china\\_law\\_prof\\_blog/files/sarftreg.pdf](http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/china_law_prof_blog/files/sarftreg.pdf), available at: <http://www.sarft.gov.cn/manae/publish/file/35/5598/html>.

served as a sign of warning to the cautious investors of provincial-level satellite TV companies. This left these companies with no other path than finding a new position.

During this time, the Internet appeared to be a virgin island yet to be explored, just as the geographically-based measurement of provincial-level communication networks began to vitiate. While Hunan Satellite TV maintained high viewing rate, ranking Number 1 among all the provincial-level satellite television channels from 2004 to 2008, it was soon recognized that the marriage between television and the Internet was a crucial and less regulated aspect of the development of provincial-level satellite television channels. In the contest of gaining influence through the Internet, JSTV again fell behind the others – until 2009. In a report on the Internet’s influence on the provincial television channels in China by the Social Science Academic Press, authored by Lingtao Li et al., two provincial-level channels that positioned themselves with cosmopolitan themes, Hunan Satellite TV and Dragon TV (Shanghai Satellite TV), ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, respectively, in 2007.<sup>27</sup> Beijing Satellite TV, surprisingly, ranked the highest, despite its relatively low viewers’ ratings. Ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> was the highly specialized satellite channel Travelling Channel, registered in Hainan Province but produced mostly in Beijing. What was not specified in the report was the measurement of Internet influence; moreover, the indicators of Internet influence were vaguely described as the recognition of the television channels on the Internet, the popularity of the television channels on the Internet, and the video online streaming rate of the television channels’ programs (literal translation: 电视频道的网络知名度, 电视频道的网络被关注度和电视频道的网络收视度) (1). Despite the ambiguity of these indicators and other measurements, the report helped to single out a few factors that could have increased the social influence of certain channels, such as being cosmopolitan in content to appeal to a nationwide audience and being controversial and episodic to provide content that could be easily searched and accessed; that is, in a word, being close to the convenience and needs of the urban population.

In such a postulation, the competition for Internet influence forced the provincial-level satellite television channels to opt for abstract brand images in

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<sup>27</sup> Data from Lingtao Li et al.’s *Provincial-level satellite TV channels of the Internet influence in China*.

their branding strategies. Dream-making and urban life guidance became the immediate targets for these provincial channels. While Hunan Satellite TV positioned itself mainly around entertainment, enveloping dream-making through talent shows, Shanghai's Dragon TV branded itself as the representative of urban channels, producing a range of programs concerning finance, travelling, and dream-making (i.e., reality television). Because of their positioning, Hunan Satellite TV and Dragon TV were the two leading provincial networks from 2000 to 2007.

While the advantages of location (and local adaptation) are diminishing through the spread of satellite communication technology and virtual networks, the previously geographically positioned provincial television networks are now seeking specific aspects to attract viewers from across the region and even throughout China.

However, this does not mean that the "locality" of a television network is irrelevant to the content produced. "Locality" refers to the location as well as to the symbolic meaning of being in a certain site or place; for instance, the historical background and cultural milieu of certain location would be associated with symbols of the locality. Local governmental policies are reflected in certain cultural symbols, for instance, "historically cultural hub" as a symbol of Nanjing, whereas "creative city" as that of Shanghai. On the level of culture policy, media has increasingly become a tool of provincial politicians rather than a mouthpiece of the central government, with a focus on a public emphasis on province and locality (Goodman 9). Less apparent is the role of the mediating agency between the local and the central, which is more latently articulated through constructing coordinating discourses than the direct transmission of policy from central to local.

In fact, the specificity of a locality is conveyed through the subtle appeal to the mentality captured and represented by the cultural association of that location. The branding strategies of the provincial-level satellite television channels, as mentioned in the previous chapter, can ascertain the importance of locality. While Beijing Satellite TV leads in the areas of news and policy critiques, corresponding to its image as a political center, Hunan Satellite TV features dream-making and idol-making in a southeastern coastal city where the CCP's presence is felt less. Shanghai's Dragon TV incorporates entrepreneurial themes into most of its similar dream-making series of shows. Entrepreneurship is an

attractive label for Shanghai’s city image, which has been historically bound with young venture-seekers in China. I will restrain from detailing how cultural associations of a place are created, as it should be sufficient to state that “locality” is central to the brand image-building and positioning of provincial-level satellite television channels.

Illustration 1: Nanjing on the map of China.



Located in the city of Nanjing, JSTV is subject to and reflective of the political identity of the city. In the eastern cluster of cities, the regional development, which is headed by Shanghai, has been the fastest compared to all other regions in China (the southern, central and western regions, according to Gustafsson, Li, Sicular and Yue<sup>28</sup>). This can be attributed to the regional development policies that came into effect in 1988. Some empirical researches

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<sup>28</sup> The study by Gustafsson, Li, Sicular and Yue has acknowledged the territorial dimension of policy-making in China, and according disaggregated income inequality in China as a whole into several spatial dimensions because of the city cluster policies. (36)

have shown that during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the income gap between regions has widened, whereas within the region, the eastern region has experienced the most rapid worsening of income inequality. Such inequality is mostly a result of the rural-urban divide within this region (Gustafsson, Li, Sicular and Yue 56). The income inequality within this region also witnessed the change in political and cultural status of cities in this region: “since the 1990s, extended metropolitan regions in coastal China have developed rapidly and have become major centers of ‘place marketing’ in China” (McGee, 121). Situated in the eastern cluster, Shanghai’s most furious growth has been weighted against that of its neighbors like Nanjing. Such unequal economic development has gained its everyday expressions through consumerism: Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen has been referred to with the key image of “Dreamland”, “for the availability of goods is, of course, not paralleled by equal access to them...goods and lifestyles might be encountered only by making visits to these cities, and then they often serve only as objects of a fascinated gaze.” (Schein 225) Mega-events such as the Shanghai Expo, the Beijing Olympic Games, and the Guangzhou Asian Olympic Games have more than once brought China’s “global cities,” or first-tier cities, worldwide attention. The importance of these cities in the globalized world has made them the usual representative cases in the studies on Chinese cities<sup>29</sup>, whereas other less studied major cities (such as Nanjing), which are close geographically yet distant in political and economic status compared with the global cities, mostly exist in the West’s imaginations of the cities’ wartime history.

Global cities, with clusters of international global attention, receive a proportionately larger amount of economic resources, followed by provincial capitals, such as Nanjing, and then prefecture-level areas. As validated in the World Bank’s publication on China urbanization, Yusuf and Saich explicit that “local government has received greater powers over investment approval, entry and exit regulation, and resource allocation...unlike in many other countries, in China these transfers do not play an equalizing role; richer areas often receive proportionately larger transfers.” (182-183). This urban hierarchy is based on the global integrated-ness of the city for its role as a market coordinator (McGee et al. 26), thus highlighting the advantages of the cosmopolitanism of certain coastal

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<sup>29</sup> In Chinese Sayings, a new term *GuangShangBei* is created to both literally denote Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing and to describe the representative cities in China.

cities in the “official” discourses about urbanization. The dynamics and competitions among cities for economic resources, however, are now less controlled by the central government due to the reforms in the 1980s (McGee et al. 15) and are therefore a growing concern for local governments. This concern manifests differently on the everyday life level of the population. Competitions engage a population once related to local identity and cultural imaginations. The cosmopolitanism found in first-tier cities is as much an internally accumulated effect as an externally imposed one, as Wu Fonglong has argued.

Nanjing, located in the heart of China, is much less a symbol for the nation’s future in terms of the perception of the domestic population and foreign people compared with its more cosmopolitan neighbors. Nanjing, as the provincial capital of the Jiangsu province, a representative of the large cities and provincial capitals but not yet a “global city” in China, combines a sense of decency of life with the geographical proximity to the first-tier cities’ “China Dream.”<sup>30</sup> The spatial arrangement of the city of Nanjing further strengthened JSTV’s symbolic status for the position of a next-to-first-tier municipal city: Differing from the economic zone and city centers of its neighbor Shanghai, Nanjing does not have the clusters of skyscrapers as office tower, but the tower of JSTV. Erupted in the old town of Nanjing, surrounded by historical architectural sites threaded by broad avenues, JSTV stands as a local landmark and a distant symbol of the city’s pride. (See Illustration 2) Beyond the circle of commercial buildings around JSTV tower, the city still retains the characteristics rural-to-urban transition: blocks of old low-rise community residential blocks, community based second hand second hand home appliances market, immigrant job markets, etc.

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<sup>30</sup> See the official discourse on the “China Dream,” available at: <http://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/the-chinese-dream-infuses-socialism-with-chinese-characteristics-with-new-energy/>.



Illustration 2: The city center of Nanjing



The second and more substantial reason JSTV became so important is that the channel had revamped the notion of reality television by adding a temporal dimension in relation to urban reality. The second section of this chapter will elaborate on how such a temporal dimension is created in the reality television shows produced by JSTV. This temporal dimension, associated with the ongoing process of becoming urban in the present tense, makes JSTV almost a synonym of “life-serving reality TV,” and the essence of “life-serving” is the supply of imaginations of the urban future. The reality television format accommodates the purpose of providing guidance for city life as participants perform and react in urban situations. The prosperity of JSTV can be attributed to the success of the marriage of reality television to urban themes in specific urban conditions in China. JSTV exemplifies how the major reality television shows it produces has colored the notion of reality television and changed how urban China can be imagined.

The time period during which JSTV’s reality television shows emerged as successes is markedly specific. As the title of this section suggests, the spatial and temporal assemblage of JSTV is more than just the historical development of a major provincial communications network; rather, it is the very specificity of the assemblage that allows such a case to stand as a window with which to view

urban mentality. Social and geographical mobility associated with dating, a status hierarchy based on geographical origin, and the urban “gatekeeping” system of *Hukou* are just a few power-effacing organs made visible in the reality television shows produced by JSTV through the representation of the specific locality of the city of Nanjing. Next, I will present a brief view of urban social issues followed by a discussion on reality television’s mechanisms that actualize and efface the forces behind it.

JSTV had positioned itself as a service-type channel during a time of mass immigration and urbanization, with an estimated annual urbanization rate of 50% according to the World Bank report by Shahid Yusuf and Tony Saich. Since the 1950s, the urban planning system has discriminated against agriculture products with its pricing strategies to subsidize rapid industrialization (Park 56), which has driven the increase of rural-to-urban immigrants. The immediately presumed consequences of this fast urbanization were the rapid growth of sub-urban areas, *Chengzhongcun* (“village in the city”), and the slums. Nonetheless, consequences of urbanization in China have been further manipulated by shifting urban policies since mid 1980s. That is to say, political factors as well, instead of only economic factors, have contributed to the urbanization process. In the 1980s, policies on accelerating urbanization were still based on the measure of urban-rural population ratio. (Tong 127). As provincial and city level government sought to increase the ratio, problems of the structure of population remained only secondary issue. The central policies on municipality, large and medium city and small cities are also divided: since mid 1980s, “to control urbanization in municipalities (Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing), to promote in large and medium cities (large municipals, provincial capital, and medium cities) and to support in small cities” has been the pivotal guidance from the central to sub-level governments. (Tong 136) The result was the rapid increase in urban-rural population ratio in provincial capitals. While first-tier cities like Beijing and Shanghai had stringent migration policies as a way of gatekeeping in the face of the high inflow of population attracted by opportunities, large cities such as Nanjing, Hangzhou, Dalian, and Xi’an had relatively loose migration policies to attract laborers and professionals for the development of these cities during that period (Fan 68). The stringent immigration policies in first-tier cities has the elite status of immigrants there. These less exclusive immigration policies in large cities

consequently brought in populations of diverse economic status and social backgrounds, varied income levels, and less competitive talents from mainly within the nation, excepting first-tier cities. By mid 1990s, provincial capitals, has reached the peak of urbanization process. By rural-urban ratio, the top ranking large cities include Tianjin, Shenyang, Wuhan, Guangzhou, Chongqing, Haerbin, Chengdu, Xi'an and Nanjing.

The rapid expansion of urbanization in large cities has been driven by a mentality summarized by Tong as “the longing for the high-income and the urban lifestyle,” (154) which was, paradoxically, only coupled by the high demand of cheap labors. The over-boost of urbanization in large cities and the delayed administrative development and infrastructural support has led to slums and crimes. A saying from this period grasps the bitter-sweet city dream for population on all income levels: “It is difficult to find an employer, even more to find an employee.” The contrast of the city dream and the reality of unemployment and poverty has been the center of discussion during the 1990s. Policies changed subsequently.

The change in policies can be seen from the shifted geographical focus of urbanization. That is to say, the acceleration of urbanization process was mainly realized through strengthening city clusters (based on geographical measures and economic conditions) and concentrating resources in the few first-tier cities. As advocated in *Proposal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Formulation of the Ten-Year Programme and the Eighth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development* in December of 1990, the target is to “double the GDP of 1980 in ten years”, “seize the opportunity of development and concentrate the resource on it”, etc<sup>31</sup>. Shanghai was immediately eligible for the policy support, as in mid 1990s, Deng Xiaoping approved the special economic development zone in Pudong, Shanghai. The consequence was an even wider income gap between first-tier cities and large-medium municipals. Therefore, the symbol of advancement continued to be carried by first-tier cities, whereas the large and medium cities were still await amid the imbalanced population structure that has resulted from earlier over-expansion of urbanization.

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<sup>31</sup> 《中共中央關於制定國民經濟和社會發展十年規劃和“八五”計劃的建議》 See <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64566/65390/4441856.html>, retrieved on 02 July, 2014.

While the geographical distinction between urban and rural continues to blur because of the characteristics of China's vast urbanization through spatial expansion and redistribution (McGee et al. 1–8), especially in large cities like provincial capitals, the word “urban” still triggers sensations about living in a city and the immaterial dimensions associated with that. Because of its geographical proximity to Shanghai, Nanjing has become a symbol of “ordinariness” and “down-to-earth-ness” in life in lyrical expressions of the consequences of urbanization. In *Name Cards of Chinese Cities*, a book project mapping the symbolic meaning of cities through excerpting celebrated writers' prose about urban China, the prose about Nanjing goes:

“Many say that city must be like a city and village like a village. But my affection towards Nanjing come from just its in-between-ness”;<sup>32</sup> “Nanjing people is a general concept – people in Nanjing would never think of whether they are Nanjing People. The city is Nanjing people and Nanjing people are the city...as opposed to Shanghai people, who often say ‘we Shanghai people...’Shanghai’s population is far more mixed than that of Nanjing, but there seems to be a unity in Shanghai, a unity based on the sense of superiority... Though Shanghai people and Beijing people may not refer to themselves as Hai-pai (京派) or Jing-pai (海派), but this sense is felt by all the rest... In Nanjing one would not hear word like ‘immigrants’, ‘out-siders’ because Nanjing is arbitrary itself.”<sup>33</sup>

This sensation about the in-between-ness of Nanjing and the consequences of urbanization of large cities are capitalized on by JSTV. In the 2012 autobiography *Suiyu-Eran* (随遇而安) by Meng Fei (the host of “*Feicheng-Wurao*” and now one of the most well-known television figures across China), he describes his immigration experience in the city of Nanjing (the location of JSTV), narrating a story of a working-class youth living in a slum-like area in the early years and moving upward to live the recognized “good life” of a moral, upright person (“despite” considerable wealth). This autobiography was a best seller in 2012, and one reason for this is that it brought into view through the lyrical expression of an immigrant's life in city is the concreteness of the materialization

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<sup>32</sup> Prose by Xiyang Chen, 1928, quoted on page 29 of *Name Cards of Chinese Cities*. Translation from Chinese to English by the author of the thesis.

<sup>33</sup> Prose by Zhaoyan Ye, 1999, quoted on page 31-33 of *Name Cards of Chinese Cities*. Translation from Chinese to English by the author of the thesis.

of city life, especially when the immigrant (and the author) is a highly esteemed figure in the television scene. Like any other ordinary boy from an immigrant family, Meng Fei has worked in print shops as apprentice, injured his hand in a print factory. Only later he became an apprentice to a journalist and slowly moved his way up to become the most famous journalist in Nanjing (before he became a television host). The everyday experience of a city people struggling with life was made conspicuous through the show and was a natural reflection of the host's own background and social sensitivity. Meng was a journalist, a social critic, and a television host before becoming the host of "*Feicheng-Wurao*." The characteristics of humorous sarcasm and realistic moralism in criticizing social issues, which made him famous as a journalist, were also the main features of the dating show in its very early stage (January to June 2010, before the SARFT-imposed censorship). Progress in life and practical guidelines to achieve such progress are the two main characteristics of the dating Meng hosts.

Back to the discussion on the role of reality television's role, this section will proceed to show that the notion of urban has been subtly modified throughout the course of the development of JSTV's reality television shows. The feature of everyday urban life in JSTV's television programs can be traced back to the popularization of a particular genre, *Minsheng* or *Fuwu* ("service", 生活服务类),<sup>34</sup> which focuses on specific areas of urban living. The first service-type show in China was "*Weinin-Fuwu*" (literally, "Serving You"), which was produced by CCTV in 1979. This "servant" style show represented the central government as concrete figures leading the local urban population. This show was considered a prototype for this category of television programs, limiting the content of the show to topics of everyday life, such as housekeeping, cooking, and investing. The format was mainly interviews with or talks by "experts" in their fields, with a strong tone of "leadership" and little interactive elements. JSTV's "*Nanjing-Lingjuli*" ("Living in Nanjing"), which was produced prior to its reality television shows, brought it close to the top in service-type shows. This marked the shift from the central leadership model to a more localized leading voice on how to live in a city. Later, "*Nanjing-Lingjuli*" was replaced by the dating show "*Feicheng-Wurao*," using the same host from "*Nanjing-Lingjuli*," Meng Fei. In this case, the

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<sup>34</sup> *Zongyi* is one of the five main categories of television programs developed in the 1980s in China.

reality television show surpassed the service-type show for one main reason: service-type shows flourish through specialization and localization, concentrating on a small audience, for the content must be highly specific to fit the interests of the group they are “serving” (Leng 5). The concrete topics and the expert talks limited the service-show to a particular area. For example, financial management is a specific topic for middle-aged, educated men who watch television for investment information, whereas family relationships are mostly only appealing to housewives. The narrow-targeted service-type shows cannot fully utilize the advantages of “broad”-casting satellite television. On the contrary, reality television has the flexibility to package various topics through the interactions of different participants and the guidance of the host. Different from the view that dating shows reflect the increasing need for dating and marriage among young people in urban China, I suggest that the appeal of these shows lies elsewhere. In fact, dating programs have their own history of having a moderate reputation in China: few dating shows have lasted for more than six months. The attraction of “*Feicheng-Wurao*” is not that it fulfills the audience’s expectations of a dating show, but rather that it introduces discussions on the concerns of city dwellers through the dating show format. It is particularly this appeal shared by all of JSTV’s reality television shows that is the focus of this thesis.

Therefore, JSTV focuses on aspect closely reflecting the needs of the urban population: emotions, feelings, and relationships. In 2007, JSTV moved up to 5<sup>th</sup> place in late-night (21:30 to 22:30) television viewers’ ratings<sup>35</sup> with the show “*Renjian*” (“The Mundane World” or “The People’s World”, 人间), which was a mixture of a talk show, storytelling, and reality television. In addition to “*Renjian*,” statistics showed that the competitive shows produced by JSTV were of a similar format to talk shows/reality shows with the theme of revealing the mental lives of the urban population in major cities on China’s East Coast. These shows included “*Qinggan-Zhily*” (“The Journey of Love”, 情感之旅), “*Fuwu-Xianfeng*” (“The Pioneer of Service”, 服务先锋), and “*Nvren-Baifengbai*” (“100% Women”, 女人百分百). JSTV chose the theme of *qinggan* (“emotions/feelings”, 情感) as the main feature of the channel, occupying an area of urban living that included themes such as competition, dream-making, and professional guidance.

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<sup>35</sup> Data from [www.1a3.cn](http://www.1a3.cn), *China News Observer* 中国新闻观察中心.

In these shows, the later themes of social critiques on and emotional support for urban populations were already obvious, setting the stage and accumulating the experiences needed for later becoming the leading channel of reality television on living a city life in China. JSTV is not wholly original in this change of direction in content and format that focuses on *qinggan*, but it is nonetheless the most successful in combining themes and formats, appealing to the tastes of a wide range of urban populations.

Furthermore, phrase “reality television” has also gained various and specific connotations over time. JSTV started developing its reality television shows after this new format had taken over one of the three main categories of Chinese television, namely *Zongyi* (“entertainment/mixed”, 综艺). *Zongyi* and the other two main categories, soap operas and news, dominated the evening golden hours of 19:30 to 22:30. Following these three main categories, sports, music, and traveling were among the more popular ones. In the beginning, reality television was seen as a potential tool that could be used to promote the spirit of the hard-working, a legacy from the revolution and the Maoist era, as exemplified by Guangdong Satellite TV’s “*Shengcun-Datiao*” and CCTV’s “*Zoujin-Shangri-La*” (“Into Shangri-La”, 走进香格里拉). These themes were exotic, since the participants in these shows were situated to experience what was beyond the reach of everyday life. During the first conference on reality television, held in Beijing with SARFT in 2001, the government had already recognized the potential of using reality television as a tool for creating mainstream culture as an alternative to soap operas and news, for example, Hunan Satellite TV’s reality dating show “*Meigui-Zhiyue*” (“Rose-Date”, 玫瑰之约) in 1998. By 2002, Hunan Satellite TV added another dating show, “*Wanmei-Jiaqi*” (“Perfect Holiday”, 完美假期), which was an exact copy of the French dating show “Loft Story,” and this show highlighted the diverse adoption of reality television’s main elements (i.e., rules and competition) into themes of everyday interests.

While Hunan Satellite TV was led to another path of talent shows and talk shows, the market for the *Zongyi* category was mainly occupied by a homogeneous kind of talent-competition-focused shows from 2004 to 2009. The hook of talent shows is its inclusive format, which allows elements of reality shows (such as the spontaneous reactions of the participants in a designed

situation of competition) to take over the even more important theme of the show. The success of Hunan Satellite TV in maneuvering the market of the *Zongyi* category set the stage for overtaking the traditionally most popular soap opera category. The advantages of creating a show using only participants' personal stories and life experiences soon became obvious. This marked the turn toward reality television, which arrived in 2010, and a few events stand out. In January 2010, CCTV added five more channels in collaboration with provincial networks to strengthen its hold on the *Zongyi* category,<sup>36</sup> a move that tried to sustain its influence in the face of fierce competition from the provincial-level satellite channels. In the same month, Dragon TV adjusted its strategy to allocate the most resources to the *Zongyi* category, reversing its previous emphasis on the soap opera category.<sup>37</sup> After this adjustment, Dragon TV produced a range of reality television shows, several of which were in the form of talent shows, career shows (similar to the American show "The Apprentice"), and talk shows. At this point, the *Zongyi* category was almost synonymous with reality television in the sense that the most well-known shows of the popular *Zongyi* category contained the basic elements of reality television. While Dragon TV made its adjustments, JSTV successfully superseded the previous *Zongyi* champion, Hunan Satellite TV, in March 2010, with its aggressive marketing of "*Feicheng-Wurao*," which commenced just a few months earlier.

To briefly conclude, the cultural imaginations and local identities are imbued into the content of the provincial television networks, working toward the cultural associations of its corresponding locality. The locality signifier in the names of the provincial television networks (i.e., Jiangsu, Hunan, and Shanghai) is an abstraction of the cultural association and political status of such locations. There are two reasons JSTV has become successful: it marks the epoch of reality television in China, and it makes reality television a very specific notion for understanding Chinese urbanity at large.

While Shanghai's Dragon TV has focused on cosmopolitan dream-chasing and star-making through a range of talent shows and career shows since 2010, JSTV chose more generalizable topics of everyday life over the same period.

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<sup>36</sup> Data from Charm Media Research, 2010, January, Vol. 01. Beijing.

<sup>37</sup> Data from Charm Media Research, 2010, January, Vol. 02. Beijing.



Narratives on decent urban life running throughout JSTV's late-night reality television programs fulfill the large cities' populations' immediate need of imagining an "urban future." The urban future materializes, in a very broad sense, in economic reformation, which is vaguely thought of in everyday life. Being caught between the need to develop and the already overcrowded, conflict-riddled urban area, large cities (including Nanjing) face the peculiar situation that on the one hand, they need immigrant talents and laborers for economic development, while on the other hand, they discriminate against the status of immigrants to different degrees. This dynamism is felt on many levels of everyday life, including purchasing power, living conditions, education and career opportunities, and dating. The reality television shows produced by JSTV function to break down the complexity of this peculiar situation of large city immigrations into pieces that can be narrated and played out on the stage.

I argue that the discourse on space and time in the content of JSTV's reality television shows corresponds to the specificity of the TV channel and the representative city of Nanjing. This correspondence is driven by both economic forces and political reasons, which helps supply a coherent urbanism in China's mainstream culture through "unofficial" discourses. What these discourses disseminate is homogenous imaginations about the urban future.

## *2. Space and Time in the Content of the Reality Shows*

A narrative composed of interior spaces and the future has emerged in the stories shown on reality television, based on the interplay between interior/exterior spaces and the past, present, and future. The discourses on space and time dominate narratives and imaginaries, serving as an umbrella for the articulations of various aspects of urban reality. I will show empirically that the popular range of reality television shows (particularly those broadcast on the major provincial-level television channel JSTV) form a particular assemblage that represents space and time in city life, formulating the mental landscapes and the psychological states of the megacities' populations. The discourses on space and time correspond with the broader assemblage of space and time of JSTV in the specific setting of contemporary China.

## Space and Place

The extended metropolitan regions in coastal China, especially the city of Shanghai (the “Dragon Head” of the Yangzi valley and delta), have developed rapidly and have become major areas of “place marketing” (McGee et al. 121–141) in China. However, on an everyday level, the experiences of cities, with their continuously blurring boundaries, are constructed by less abstract marketing strategies. If the word “city” means a place, it is first experienced through its material components and the embodied experiences of its dwellers (Grosz 103), whose lives construct various “places.” Places like homes, workplaces, malls, and roads are built on presumptuously empty spaces (or potentially empty spaces after the demolition of buildings in the case of China), and they provide the materials for and the mental elements of a city dweller’s existence. The production of space in Lefebvre’s conception concisely structuralizes the relation between spatial and material production as the intertwining social space and lived space, which is a product and a form used to produce a hierarchical structure.

Expressed with less Marxist rhetoric, imagining a life in the city is often preconditioned by these places, because “our lives are so place-oriented and place-saturated that we cannot begin to comprehend, much less face up to, what sheer placeless-ness would be like” (Casey ix, quoted in Buchanan and Lambert 1). Viewed in this light, representations of space in terms of place-making carry the dynamics between the actual placemaking and the mental landscape of the population. Because we exist in a world where no life can be imagined and lived without turning “empty” spaces into places, it is important to examine why empty spaces are made into places and how these spaces are imagined and narrated.

## Time and Linear Temporality

Time, according to Deleuze, is the most powerful reality one can experience. As opposed to the Kantian idea of time as a human faculty, Deleuze argues that “time is not the interior in us, but just the opposite, [time is] the

interiority in which we are, in which we move, live and change” (Deleuze, *Cinema* 82). Deleuze distinguishes the real experiences of time from the linear and historical time that condition humans’ existence and subjectivity. The time in which one’s consciousness lies prevails in that person’s discourses, commonly expressed through the past, the present, and the future. The temporal features of events expressed through time in discursive and non-discursive formations carry a value depending on the time period referred to (Farkas). Time is a framework for depicting urban life. The past, the present, and the future are thought of and talked about in particular associations with aspects of urban life (e.g., consumption, marriage, career, etc.), constraining the imaginations of how urban lives are and should be lived.

The depiction of temporality has been recognized as the site for alternative discourses to the neo-liberalism temporality in China. As exemplified by Chion’s study on SuperGirl Voice, alternative temporality is brought by the controversial figure of the contestants of this reality television show<sup>38</sup>. Inspired by yet not fully concurring Chion’s finding in the case of JSTV’s reality television, the analysis following will show that the dominating way of representing time in the structure of the reality shows by JSTV makes linear temporality the defining framework for any eligible narrative about urban lives. Time is represented and expressed in the narratives of the consciousness of a particular urbanism according to the population’s understanding of city life.

### **The Structures of the Reality Television Shows Produced by JSTV**

As mentioned previously, reality television is a bit of a misnomer, as it is constructed rather than documenting reality itself. The constructed-ness of the shows and the synchronization of different political interests, the economic imperative, and the audience’s tastes and behaviors are distributed in many

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<sup>38</sup> Chion’s study views the reality television show SuperGirl Voice as a site that allows the emerge of “new moral and cultural reflexion for the performance of an alternative Chinese temporality,” and reads the censorship on this program as a supporting materials for the above argument, yet fails to address the inconsistencies between the neoliberal temporality and the alternative one. See Kiera Chion’s dissertation “Super Girls in China: The performance of Neoliberal Values, Desire, and Alternative Temporalities.”

elements that are implemented according to a certain structure of a particular show. The structures of the shows embed mechanisms to make visible certain discourses of space and time that are otherwise opaque and not articulable. Each of the six reality television shows broadcast as a late-night program on JSTV throughout the week are designed with certain structures in mind. What I call “structure” here is not the script or the director’s plan for the show, but rather how the show incorporates different themes, how game/show procedures facilitate the themes, and how the technical aspects of the show, such as video editing and stage setting, contribute to the themes. By treating each show as an entity with certain rules governing how discussion and visual content are related to the themes and the games, the organic structure of the show produces the overarching discourse on space and time that frames how the content must be presented. Seen at this level, the structure of the show is not only the effect of the production team but also a collective effect of many seemingly contingent but structured features.

The most popular dating show, broadcast every Saturday and Sunday evening, features the confrontations and negotiations between typical male and female social roles and expectations of urban life. The show creates a situation involving partner selection, based on interviews between the participants and a discussion of the videos about the participants’ lives, which are shot and edited by the production team. The host, Meng Fei, who has an immigrant background and was a social critic who hosted the popular talk show “*Nanjing Lingjuli*” (“Living in Nanjing”) before becoming the host of “*Feicheng-Wurao*,” brings his previous style of social critiques and draws on topics closely related to the heated issues that arise from living in a city. Though the content seems to be dialogue-dominated, the visual elements constitute the main body of the dating competition. Discourse-loaded visual content includes the studio stage that places the men and women on confrontational sides, the videos directed by the staff of the production team that supposedly document the life experiences of all the participants, and the clothes worn by the participants. Because the game unfolds around the lives of the participants, the discursive and visual narratives are centered on their life paths, career choices, and future lives. The competition in dating frames the participants’ dialogue and videos, focusing on their individual lives and the question of what his/her life will be like in the future. As opposed to how the commonly associated romance-theme shows develop, “*Feicheng-Wurao*” is anchored in more function-

related behaviors and social characteristics (or 条件, *tiaojian*) of the participants. The features of different lifestyles are expressed by how they will function in the future.

The quiz shows are disguised as games, particularly in two aspects: they lure the participants with the hope of surprise and fame and they produce hierarchical labels. Curiously, these hooks are usually packaged in gifts related to urban housekeeping. The winner of one quiz show receives items often desired by urban households, such as DV cameras, television sets, or computers. Yet it is not the items themselves that trigger pleasure in the participants or the audience, but instead the imaginations of the associations around these items. The other particular aspect apart from surprise and fame is what I see as the procedure to nominate hierarchical labels based on the backgrounds of the participants. While one quiz show, “*Yizhan-Daodi*,” focuses on education and the life experiences of the participants, the other quiz show, “Raid the Cage,” emphasizes physical dexterity and knowledge about living in the city. “Raid the Cage” literally entails grabbing gifts from a cage, which requires the strength to carry and the mind to identify the more worthy items.

The career show “*Tuoyingerchu*” positions itself as the agent for selecting and guiding young people in their career paths. The participants (or contestants) are tested and interviewed by experts in their respective field from highly sought-after professions specific to urban districts, such as models, Web engineers, and television hosts. The structure is straightforward: by equating career advancement with personal improvement, this show is able to select participants based on their individual skills and developmental path. Apart from professional qualifications and specialized skills, the show challenges the contestants with tests and topics related more to life experiences and the practical skills of dealing with problems unrelated to their professions. The winners and losers are defined by whether one’s moral and social qualities are proven to the experts and the employer. The tacit promise to the winner is an imagined happy future life, whereas the real future lives of the contestants are of no interest as the show proceeds.

Though JSTV has been constantly developing new shows with different titles and formats, including reality television shows, the structures have remained relatively stable. The persisting framework of the stability of the structures over time is the theme of individual competition over future imaginations of urban

lives. These reality shows are about inclusion and exclusion, since essentially they create situations that necessarily include and exclude. Before participants speak, the form and the structure of the reality shows have already given prominence to a certain way of discussing issues related to urban lives. Without any procedures for exclusion, such as prohibition or silencing (except for the apparent censorship by SARFT), the shows proceed to take a taciturn approach to the topics. The discussions and the visual representations of urban living are diverse in content but are homogenous in the discourses on space and time. The structures of the shows are grounded in the linear temporality of individual personal development in concrete urban situations through both the discursive and visual discourses on space and time, disabling collective participation and collaboration in the urban setting.

### *Interior Space*

Two concepts of the vague word “space” appear in the content of the range of reality television shows produced by JSTV. The first is a material objective space, existing in the form of a place that is usually related to the private lives of the participants, or what will be referred to as the interior space. The second is an imaginary subjective space in an outdoor scene, sometimes internalized and arbitrarily fancied, or what will be referred to as the exterior space. The different degrees of abstractness in the idea of interior and exterior spaces (exterior space is more abstract, while interior space is more concrete) blur the conflicting boundaries between enclosed places and open spaces, bringing about a tacit coherence between the two and disguising the inharmonious matters in both.

The structures of the reality television shows offer a concrete depiction of place, which is mostly associated with the participants’ lives through imaginaries about interior space. Interior space is associated with enclosed, private, or domestic spaces, mostly without location specificities. Videos of the reality television shows’ participants’ in-house scenes, which are staged in domestic places such as workplace interiors and private vehicles, are shown as the main referents of their urban lifestyles. The lifestyles featured on screen are not directly

associated with definite locations (i.e., specific cities or particular districts). The commonalities in these lifestyles are labeled with symbols of elitism (*nouveaux riche*), intellectualism (*haigui* 海归, i.e., Chinese people who returned to China after studying abroad), the middle class (*xiaokang* 小康, a Confucianism term for a functional society of modest means, composed of the middle class), and the lower class (*caogen* 草根, grass roots, usually associated with new rural-to-urban immigrants, menial workers, and those who are unemployed). These symbols are represented by interior spaces. For example, symbols of elitism are associated with a closet full of branded clothing or the décor of a workplace, while those of intellectualism are associated with a reading room scene or a university library. Upon turning into places, interior spaces are subject to the common imaginaries of materialistic lifestyles, such as driving foreign cars, dressing in branded clothing, and engaging in leisure activities.

One notorious statement, “I would rather cry *in* a BMW than laugh on a bicycle” by female participant Ma Nuo on the dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*,” helps illustrate the construction of imagined places. In the show, little is known about Ma Nuo’s current living environment, while much is shown about her criteria for choosing a partner. The contrast between a BMW car and a bicycle entails a more complex process of signification than mere symbols of economic status. In her infamous statement, instead of an enclosed and confining space, the symbol of a BMW is imagined as an interior where other materialistic pursuits are attached and a better life can be imagined. On the contrary, the open space around a bicycle is deemed unimaginable, for it is empty of the symbols that can be attached to the enclosed space of an expensive, private car. The narrative of placemaking is completed in later episodes, where the contrast is clear when comparing Ma Nuo’s two pursuers: while one shows off his sports car and invites Ma Nuo *in* for a ride, the other is not given the opportunity to describe (with concrete images) what he would be able to offer to Ma Nuo. The latter pursuer’s promises of happiness to Ma Nuo are silenced, both through the discursive construction of his image as lacking in self-awareness and by eliminating the imaginaries of a concrete lifestyle. As a result, Ma Nuo was indirectly encouraged to avoid responding to his promises because they were considered non-existent, as

they offered nothing concrete, such as a sports car. Moreover, the space in his life was unimaginable because it was considered undefined and empty.

A twist of media censure by SARFT has further obscured the discursive construction of space. Ma Nuo's lesson on choosing a partner was quickly learned by other male guests on the show. Since then, the introduction videos of the male guests have focused on the visual depiction of their home, workplace, and leisure places, so that images of these places are readily available for imagining a future life. Note also that these videos are shot and edited by the production team of the show. When the central authority issued a policy based on a SARFT regulation restricting the direct depiction (referring mostly to discursive constructions) of an overtly materialistic world view, imagining and constructing places took a tacit path, mainly through the visual display of symbols in interior spaces.<sup>39</sup> This technical turn of events secured a balancing point between the market and the government. The result is a more subtle usage of symbols without discursive construction in conveying the discourse.

In the quiz shows, game shows, and career shows created in the wake of the dating show controversies, the material life that is achievable in the imaginable future is now recreated in the studio in the competitions for domestic appliances in the quiz and game shows, and the aspirations of becoming successful are expressed through visualizing workplace interiors that are usually associated with a financially rewarding job. These associations are not verbalized but are made visible only through the depiction of the interior of the workplace and the home. The visual content of the interior urban space that is shown as the background is actually the foreground. Discussions center on the signs represented by the interior space. The quiz show "Raid the Cage" is visually dominated by the display of home appliances (the winner's gifts) and the prices associated with a furnished home that includes them, though the ostensible theme is about winning quizzes.

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<sup>39</sup> Two documents were issued on June 9, 2010, by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), defining the content of the dating show as "undignified, inferior" entertainment. Similar comments were subsequently broadcast on two main news channels by the central government.



## Exterior Space

Exterior space is imagined in a different way. Life is said to materialize only in isolated interior spaces, whereas exterior spaces remain void. City streets, nature scenery, and encounters in public spaces outside of the program studio are absent in these programs, as if life does not exist outside of flats, offices, or clubs. However, this absence does not mean emptiness. The vague, undefined outdoor spaces and the exteriority of cities are used to express fluidity and mobility in life. Contrary to the zoned, regulated, and controlled urban spaces, the images of city landscapes are arbitrarily related to the mental life or the inner world of its population (see Illustrations 2 and 3).



Illustration 2. A screenshot from the dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*.”



Illustration 3. Another screenshot from the dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*.”

The depiction of exterior space is functional, but only as the vague background for other things to happen. It is common especially in visualizing the population’s internal states, such as attitudes toward life and their emotions. One common technique is using outdoor scenery as a background for the close-up shots of the participants, creating lyrical moments that highlight their mental state. Images of university campuses and sports venues are usually shown as the background of the narratives on youthful ambitions; sun shining over a grassy area represents an extroverted personality and longings for a happy life; and an empty road or railway station signifies difficulties to be overcome in life. The exteriority of cities are fragmented and re-imagined through the vague association with the inner world of the participants, which are not made into places or depicted with concrete images of everyday material life.

Another functionality of using settings in exterior spaces, such as a park, is to create an open space for a performance unrelated to the area. The career show “*Tuoying-erchu*” uses these undefined open spaces only as a vaguely described space for some games or tests that are unassociated with the place itself. In other words, the exterior spaces, even those that have appeared in the shows, are not represented as places in the city but merely as space. For instance, a salesman of luxury brands in Milan can be presented in a video that is shot in Venice. The locality is presented as nothing more than a mere symbol, an empty shell for any fabrication. The localities of the city’s exterior in which the visual content is shot and the visual materials produced are often unrelated (since the associations with those localities are built up only by imagining interior spaces).

The exterior spaces are scenes in which a progressive, linear life path is situated and where social and cultural mobility is possible, because exteriority is devoid of the immobility of solid material reality. This representation of mobility is also visible in the strategy of recruiting exotic foreign participants (or Chinese participants with unusual overseas experiences), featuring alternatives to the typical depiction of the interior spaces in the home and workplace. The cultural imaginaries of foreigners are constructed by their spatial mobility. For example, special editions of the dating show in the U.S., the U.K., France, and Korea

feature participants from multicultural backgrounds; the game shows recruit expatriates or foreign students in China to participate in the program; and the quiz show markets itself as being international, with the title “Brazilian Brought Interpreter to Compete in the Quiz.” The narratives in these programs focus on immigration and living a mobile life, usually by telling positive and happy stories with little nostalgia. The transnational experiences of the participants replace the concrete images of urban life, in that travelling or working abroad represents the exterior space. What are curiously omitted in these constructions are cultural specificities and references. The concept of exterior space is represented by locality and mobility, contrary to the static and domestic interior spaces in the city. The space exterior to homes, offices, and shopping malls are transparent, empty spaces that allow mobility and that form vaguely imagined foreign cities.

### *The Past, the Present, and the Future*

The format of reality television – competing to win a game – presupposes a linearity of time: the present is lived and understood as lacking a vision and as merely a transitional stage toward a future when missions will be fulfilled. This can be expressed through the desire to find a partner, a fulfilling career, or a furnished home. Winning on a show represents a bridge between dissatisfaction with the present and fulfillment in the future. A brief survey of reality television themes revealed that the most pressing issues for the urban population are related to family and career – the future is about the process of “building” (e.g., a family or a successful career), while there is a sense of incompleteness in the present.

Reality television does not promise the participants success but instead evokes symbolic participation through the process of future-building, at least in terms of material aspects, because symbols of success in a material life can be easily provided. The gap between material success and psychological well-being is visible and yet it is also well disguised. “The future” is the lasting theme of these reality television shows, as is reflected by the brand images of JSTV (i.e., *qinggan* 情感 and *xingfu* 幸福). As viewed through these reality television shows, the promise of happiness exists only in the future.

In such a construction, the past is represented as accumulative factors in the making of the present and the future. Causality is necessarily assumed. The past lives of the participants are related only as a basis for their present state, as if the past were a pile of files that determined a person at the present time. By displaying the files of the participants' past, the reality television shows press the participants into the future, which is activated through a "future anterior" narrative of what "will have been," exposing the future to a sense of crisis that has to be defined and imagined in the present through the program. The participants who "fail" to respond to the imminence of the future, for example, when confronted with the question "what if," are denied further conversation. Labels such as "not progressive-thinking" or "not planning for the future" are attached to the concept of "failure." According to the rules of the dating game and the career game, "failure" will result in an exclusion from a discursive passage into an imaginable future. Furthermore, the participants disown the past because that timeframe has already been constructed. Thus, what is left for them to construct is the future within the framework of the "future anterior."

The progressive tone and linear development from past to present is a dominant theme in reality television programs. While the future is imaged as having achieved a materialistic lifestyle with fluidity of space, the present is a state devoid of self-awareness that needs to be defined and advanced. One typical character from the dating show is Peng Xiaojuan, a country girl who moved to a small city in Henan Province with her parents. She was insecure and had always longed for a more satisfying life in the city, especially after suffering from discrimination and being bullied. Peng Xiaojuan was featured as an example of how a person can transform and adopt an urban lifestyle. The program used dialogue to document this process of transformation. When first presented, Peng Xiaojuan was a timid and incapable girl who was not self-aware. Through the guidance given to her on the dating show, she gradually learned about her past and present state of insecurity, and she changed from having little self-awareness to becoming fully self-conscious. At the beginning of the show, Peng Xiaojuan could not speak in public about herself. Through personal growth, she was finally able to speak up for herself and choose a date. This concluded her story on the show, symbolizing the final stage of walking through the past to the present in order to prepare for a better life in the future. The boundaries of Peng Xiaojuan's

small city in Henan Province began to dissolve at that moment, and the better life ahead of her became a blurred image of an unspecified utopian urban space.

“Development is practice! / Only development counts!” (“*Fazhan caishi yingdaoli!*”). This slogan, which marks a pragmatic turn toward a neo-liberal sense of linear progressive time, is played out on a personal level in the reality television shows. Different from soap operas, popular novels, and self-help books, which all often assume the linear progression of time as the framework of the narrative, reality television highlights the concept of time in a more participative and intense way. Almost every 15 minutes there is a new story of a participant marching into an imaginable future, be it a future featuring a career or family life. The format in which the story is played out invites symbolic participation and identification from the audience, in that viewers share the “future anterior” with the participants on the screen.

### 3. *Conclusion: Toward a Homogenous Urban Dream? The Making of Everyday Life*

The curious assemblage of space and time and the centrality of the narrative, based on places/buildings and interior spaces and expressions concerning the future, are particular characteristics of contemporary reality television shows. While the official yearbook and statistics on the city of Nanjing published by the prefectural bureau do not mention any of the reality television shows produced by its major satellite channel (i.e., it excludes from the official record anything that has an effect on the lives of the people of Nanjing)<sup>40</sup>, the underestimated or deliberately avoided influence of these reality shows is seen in many other statistics by profit-driven research institutions. This discrepancy can be explained by the different focuses of the government’s records and the channel’s practices: the prefectural-level official record recognizes the development of and changes in the urban area in terms of policies and long-term planning, even in areas of morality-building (*jingshen-wenming-jianshe* 精神文明

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<sup>40</sup> See Nanjing Almanac 2011, section on media communication. Instead of the popular television programs, the Nanjing Almanac records the *mainstream* programs.

建设), whereas the reality shows connect aspects of everyday lives that are otherwise too minute and concrete for governmental attention.

The city space is obscured and reconstructed in such a way that the entrances, passages, and exits of places are both disrupted and confirmed by the immobile interior spaces, segregating material urban lives into discontinued themes, disrupted in that the passages dissolve into the unimaginable exteriority of the city, hidden to interior spaces, and confirmed in that the city can be imagined only by the association of living in interior spaces, in which the entrances and the exits are controlled. Such control is not exercised by any particular institution of the government but rather by the collective media, which confines the imagining of urban space by the concrete individual units of urban interiors.

The interplay between space and time is an essential assemblage that conditions the expressions and imaginaries of city lifestyles, highlighting a developmental path toward an individual and materialistic life. The entrance into and exit from a flat, an office, or a vehicle confirms the units of urban life, in which the individual, not the community or group, is the actor. The repeatedly performed everyday life in an interior unit normalizes the segregated city life as that lived by individuals. The characteristics of individuality in the depiction of urban interiors are further emphasized through the competitions in which only individuals are winners. The path to winning is the path to progress. The linearity of progress mechanizes the procedures of the shows by implying in the discourse that the past and the present are accumulations for the future, as the participants endeavor to verbalize their improvements over time, which are not shown at the present but will nonetheless be in effect in the future. The winner wins the competition for a better-imagined future that can never be visualized otherwise.

In conclusion, the structure of JSTV's reality television shows can be summarized on three levels: (1) the "locality" of Nanjing as an expanding and developing city caught up in the discrepancy between first-tier Chinese cities' national status and the universal "China Dream"; (2) the position of service-type shows and the brand images of *qinggan* (情感, "feelings/emotions") and *xingfu* (幸福, "happiness and well-being"); and (3) the space and time interplay that constructs a possible linear passage to the imagined ideal future city life. In a

word, it is the linear development in the city's interior spaces for individuals' everyday lives that is constructed as the dominant framework.

The appearance of parallel forces, parallel between the spatial-temporal creation of JSTV and that presented in its content, has many political consequences. The performance of future everyday life as an individual is the fundamental element of these reality shows, as opposed to the performance of talents or idol-making that focuses on the present particular life by the other stream of reality television. Yet why are the imaginations of a future everyday life specific to a channel branded for emotions and feelings (*qinggan*), rather than the representation of the present particular life of idols? It is precisely because that the framework for future everyday life is the mirror and the reinforcement of the cultural imaginations that correspond to the "locality" of Nanjing, the urban planning and policies invisible in the shows. What is absent in these shows are the imaginations about the constant building and renewal of physical urban capital happening throughout small and large cities in China. On the one hand, the exterior of the city is absent as well as outside of the imaginations of the future urban life. The cultural symbols of Nanjing and other large cities (but not first-tier cities) carry no elitism like that of their cosmopolitan neighbors. On the other hand, the imagined linear development promises a decided future of prosperity. This promise is important. It is the modesty of the present. The outlook for a better future life (compared with the present and the current first-tier cities) depends on the individual development of the otherwise undefined future. These absences of city exteriors and governmental roles mark both the developmental gap in the present life and the promise of a better-imagined future. It is this lack and longing that calls for the emergence of a channel like JSTV.

### Chapter 3. Discourse on Knowledge

Urban living has been dissembled and reduced to a linear developmental path in JSTV's reality television shows, especially in the visual arrangement of the shows. The linear progressive view on individual development in urban life would be vaguely defined if the process of progressing was not substantiated by achievable means: without substantiating and enacting dominance with the mechanism of enforcement, the developmental scheme embedded in this urbanism could not have mobilized the communication between participants or enable the imagined actualization of a better future life. A mechanism of mobilization is crucial in including and enclosing the participants (as well as the audience in the case of reality television) in the process of linear progression. It is this process of enaction which actualizes the forces of linear progressivity. To find out how the "homogenous urban dream" is substantiated, I investigated discourses on knowledge, which I have identified as the main mechanism of power-effacement.

At first sight, the discourses on knowledge might seem to be a call for the analysis of the procedures of the television shows and how these shows mobilize participation. This analysis is indeed important and fundamental to further analysis. However, to be content with inquiring only about the strategies of these television productions would in fact disguise the real dynamics on which these shows are based and operate. The success of these shows ineluctably means the success of certain power operations. Thus, the more important task of this chapter is to ground the analysis in the contents and structures of these television shows in order to interrogate their broad power structure. This power structure promotes the new, liberal perspective of economic development and represents the installment of an actual economic pull of the market and the governmental imperatives of the party in urban development. Moreover, the analysis of JSTV's power structure will involve investigating how the discourses on their reality television shows build on existing "mainstream" and popular discourses. In this chapter, I will attempt to answer the following questions: What is this mechanism that enacts the linear individual developmental model of urbanism? What makes the shows more than just representations of a certain urban lifestyle?



Several characteristics and processes stand out as signifiers of success in pursuing an urban future in the dating shows, game shows, career shows, and quiz shows produced by JSTV: (1) being successful in school, as in mastering knowledge in formal education (i.e., what I call being “book smart”); (2) being experienced in urban society, as in understanding how things are managed (i.e., what I refer to as being “street smart”); and (3) in cases where the participants fail to exhibit/perform signs of previous participants, they enter the process of becoming “self-aware,” which means (at a minimum) they know their position and status in society – this self-awareness, paradoxically, is also euphemized as the knowledge of the self and the social conditions of the self. Under this set of signifiers, losers (or failures) are eradicated from the discourse on knowledge. I will delineate the social context in which these discourses already exist and how JSTV’s reality television shows reinforce them to form a coherent network of discourses that legitimizes the sources of knowledge production in urban living.

If formal education defines what is conventionally referred to as knowledge, social experience (or even self-awareness) is also constructed with boundaries and processes of acquiring it. In other words, as opposed to whatever we learn socially about society and ourselves, only what is strictly within the borders of knowledge and legitimized by the reality television shows is considered valid. Besides the obvious Foucaultian rhetoric presented here, categorizing knowledge according to how it is defined and how it functions reveals more of the state of politics in China played out in the everyday lives of its cities’ populations. The question is why and how are these processes of acquiring knowledge linked to the imagined good future life. Though the linkages between these processes and a desirable future life are not logically or empirically formed, the apparent convenience in addressing concrete everyday life issues through the above processes is the dominant way of demonstrating the progressive path to success in life as portrayed in the reality television shows. This linkage is the framework for the perceptions and judgments of “good” or “bad” practices (or winners or losers) in pursuing a good future life in cities. JSTV’s reality television shows exploit the conventionally accepted linkages to tacitly fabricate promises and terms of a good future urban life, making obvious the otherwise uncertain steps to an imagined future.

## 1. *Book Smart*

The discourse on success in JSTV's reality television shows (especially the quiz shows "Raid the Cage" and "Yizhan-Daodi") relates to the function and the symbolic status of the formal education system in China. The two quiz shows adopt questions that are typical of formal education examinations; in addition, the game shows and the dating shows promote a mode of serious learning (in preparation for the quiz shows) and associate the winning of the game to access to a better urban future. These reality television shows represent the process of strengthening the linkage between the hard work to win the quizzes and success in life in a city. The actions and behaviors of the participants are formulated to reflect the legitimacy of the logic of the state education system.

### **The Symbolic Status of State Education**

For many, the state education system is considered the only way to achieve upward social mobility, particularly since the resumption of the national college entrance examination beginning in 1979. The importance attached to the state education system is almost mythical. In urban areas, pre-school children already feel pressure from their parents about education and the examination. Villagers go into debt to support the schooling of their children because they believe that education is the ticket for their migration to cities. Modern compulsory state education in China has been trusted as the only machine capable of producing a socially well-connected and recognized candidate for most families. Upward mobility, in the eyes of families who have not been through the state education system themselves, is often simply equated to scoring high on the college entrance examination, which is held once a year. Failed candidates invest years in retaking the examination. Special schools and tutoring agencies for students retaking the examination have become common across the country. Suicides (by students or parents) as a result of failing the exam happen every year.<sup>41</sup> The six years of secondary education are intended to train the students to be competitive test-takers, specifically for the national college entrance

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<sup>41</sup> <http://news.sohu.com/2003/12/23/43/news217324383.shtml>.

examination, even though the state education system is primarily designed for more general education training. Producing complementary study materials and providing tutoring for test-taking have become lucrative industries. Thus, the state education system and the examination have both been symbolically and practically important.

These commonly known facts aside, the more specific goal of the state education system is its exclusive dependency on the college entrance examination, the *Gaokao*. Because of the *Gaokao*'s exclusivity, the importance of the end result has completely taken over the process: whether the candidate scores high or not on this examination has become the sole measurement of the quality of the state education system, which understandably leads to the filtering out of candidates who do not possess the very specific exam skills of memorizing accurately and following problem-solving steps closely. Moreover, the contingency between education and personal advancement is emphasized. Rural-to-urban immigrant students are often the cases used to describe improved living conditions brought about by education. When one reads national news about the state education system and the college entrance examination, on all levels the causality between achieving success in the examination and being a success in society is the dominant discourse about the value of these examination machines. The expression of this discourse is realized through condemning outlier cases and confirming the normality of the discourse. However, the enforcement of such discourse is achieved through negative motivation, such as the top-down dissemination of such sayings as, "A life without going through the *Gaokao* is incomplete" and "Winning in the *Gaokao* may not give you a higher chance of success in life but without winning in the *Gaokao* you have almost no chance." The long-term investment in education, which culminates in taking the *Gaokao*, gives more incentive for people to continue to invest in it even when the outcome is unclear. In a word, the state education system functions as a way to confine individuals to a pre-designed course of actions, from primary school education all the way to the *Gaokao*. Failure to follow such a course of action is perceived as a threat or a danger to the promise of a good future life. The appeal of such a course of action is the *promise* of a future that is imagined through different channels and a *threat* of not attaining this future – and it is this appeal that is used in the structure of the quiz shows.

However, there is a missing link in this appeal (or discourse): how can success in the state education system turn into success in life on a practical level? How contingent economic development on a macro level and personal advancement on a personal level are on an educational level remains opaque in most official documents. Everything seems to be summed up by the monumental slogan “Revitalization through Education” (*jiaoyu-xingguo* 教育兴国) that can be found on many secondary schools’ campuses and in many official documents on education in China. The missing link in this discourse (of promise and a pre-designed course of action) leaves the system open to challenge. Counter-cases have occurred that have disrupted this promise and pre-designed course of action. The magic of success in the college entrance examination seems to lose its spell in many cases; success in the state education system and the college entrance examination has failed to guarantee the promise of upward mobility. One example of this failure is university diploma holders facing unemployment, which is a situation unimaginable in the 1980s but is now a much reported topic in mass media. In one case, Lu Buxuan, a 1989 graduate from the top university in China, Peking University, made national headlines in 2010 when he chose to become a butcher, a much despised job in many people’s eyes. When he was admitted to Peking University, he told everyone he encountered that “I have succeeded,” but it appeared that he did not live up to the expectations put on him. Instead of justifying his choice by a discourse of free choice in terms of lifestyle or the measurement of success (i.e., as if being a butcher does not count as success), the media covered mainly his education background and his current career choice. In another case in 2013, a Tsing Hua University graduate who became a security guard attracted similar attention. These graduates’ choices were not a matter of personal career preference but, rather, a challenge to the social hierarchy set up by the education system. Reports on such controversial cases, instead of challenging the dominant discourse, actually adopted a negative tone that expressed shock and disappointment, even though later on the news reports adjusted their tone, especially in response to Lu’s own words: “I have disgraced my mother institution (*muxiao* 母校).” In Lu’s television interview on a popular talk show on CCTV, the host, Chai Jing, attempted to adjust the dialogue to the nature of Lu’s job, suggesting that career choice should not be placed in a hierarchy. Not surprisingly,

Lu's answer re-confirmed the normative discourse and led back to the discrepancy between the superiority of his education and the "low level (*diji* 低级)" of his job. These counter-cases are incorporated into the existing discourses as outlier cases to actually reaffirm the promise of the state education system. Even in academic discourses on education reform in China, the failure of the education system is attributed to it being an incomprehensive system with inequality in the distribution of educational resources,<sup>42</sup> not to the problems of the system itself. Therefore, the actual knowledge gained through higher education neither reflects the caliber of the student nor predicts the future success of that person, so the paradoxical importance attached to the status symbol of a higher education diploma still persists. Thus, the state education system has become more of a symbol than an actual system, as well as an occasional research topic for describing inequality in China.

This status symbol is reaffirmed in all the reality television shows produced by JSTV, through the reproduction of the cultural associations (and social expectations) of the participants who affirm the fairness and efficiency of the state education system. However, what has aroused more suspicion is that the logic of and the hierarchy created by the state education system are reinforced through the rules and processes of the games – paradoxical or even absurd as it might sound, the *seriousness* of the *Gaokao* and its promise of success are incorporated into the *playfulness* of the quiz shows.

### The Seriousness in Play

JSTV's reality television shows incorporate the form and the content of the state education system in different modalities: the quiz shows are a platform from which the learned knowledge of formal education and knowledge attained through the similar method of memorizing and understanding are directly displayed, while the game shows and the dating shows facilitate the showing-off

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<sup>42</sup> Please refer to the official history of Chinese education reformation since 1949 by Chen Xiuling and the edited volume of research articles on the Chinese education system and its inequality. Chen Xiuling. *Jiaoyu-Xingguo: Diyici Quanguo Jiaoyu Gongzuo Huiyi Zhaokai (Revitalization through Education: The First National Conference on Education)*. Jilin: Jilin Press, 2010. See also Postiglione, Gerard A. *Education and Social Change in China: Inequality in a Market Economy*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2006.

of such knowledge during conversations and publicly sanction the display of knowledge as a legitimate route to achieve their life goals (i.e., the goal of dating or marriage, or that of finding a dream job). This knowledge, usually in the form of quotations out of context or a simplification of concepts, is delivered in one-sentence quiz answers or a few phrases. A list of examples of a quiz is quoted below:

What was the first animal that appeared on stamp after 1949? *Monkey.*

How many countries were included in Euro zone when it was established? *11.*

The Chinese calligraphy style *Kai* is also referred to as? *Zhen.*

What is the dot on the board of Weiqi called? *Xing.*

The phrase *Zhuo-Dao* was first used to describe which figure in history? *Cao-cao.*

What is the first day of New Year called on Chinese lunar calendar? *Yuan-dan.*

What is the earliest work on medical science in ancient China? *Qiminyaoshu.*

These examples show that the “knowledge” displayed is a signifier of knowledge only. Thus, these quiz show games and public conversations about the content and form related to the state education system cannot directly illuminate the audiences about the subject. The quiz shows, though they include pedagogical content, do not teach any actual facts or knowledge in the rolling banter of the quiz: the quizzes and conversations are so transient that even comprehending the question or topic at home needs more time than the few seconds the hosts and the participants spend on them. That is to say, because the audience cannot learn history or literature just by watching the show, the show does not appeal to the audience’s reasoning that they are learning knowledge by watching. The questions in the quizzes are usually based on abstract information out of context and stripped of any practical use. The dating shows display the participants’ knowledge by exhibiting their education backgrounds, which already serve as legitimate means of approving their content related to the subject of knowledge. The pleasure of watching these episodes and their appeal to the public are ascertained by the popularity of these shows and by the persistent incorporation of the structure of the state education system into the shows. The appeal could be the excitement aroused by the fast turnover of participants, the prizes and the prides,

or the anticipation of surprises, as in many other competition-centered game shows. However, this fails to explain the *seriousness* of these reality shows.

This appeal, as argued above, is not aesthetic or rational. The *seriousness* involved in the display of knowledge comes from the fulfillment of the yearning for a passage from regimented action to a promised future – the appeal of hope and promise. How can this vast examination machine for talent production and filtering, which has involved around 9 million candidates on average<sup>43</sup> for the past decade, be sustained if its promise is not always fulfilled? How can its symbolic status remain intact while its practical side has been revealed to be defective so often? If the state education system is considered the only filter and promise to achieving upward social mobility, the question should be how does the population struggle to maintain such a feeble promise?

Ultimately, this promise signals the structure of knowledge that is maintained through the state education system. To most of those who have no other legitimate means to climb the social ladder, the promise must be kept so they can live with the hope of a better future. Effective in this way, the reality television shows modulate the games so that the hope for a better future is often linked to a public display of knowledge typical of formal education in China.

The reality television shows, especially the quiz shows and the game shows, appeal to the audiences' desire to see the status symbol of formal education maintained. In other words, the special features on the state education system and its related topics are called for so that public responses to them can be made, which is why these shows are needed. The normative status of formal education is expected to be visualized and reconfirmed in the shows. The special editions of the quiz show "*Yizhan-Daodi*," which feature specific participants from certain education backgrounds, such as primary school students, high school students, or university students, are made to fulfill or break such expectations. Even in the episodes that do not feature any theme, such as the quizzes based on more general subjects (or just common sense) that are not necessarily linked to formal knowledge, the symbolic status of the participants is emphasized in the title of the episode or in the newly released mini-blogs on the show's website. For instance, the "long-standing" idol of "*Yizhan-Daodi*" ("Standing Till the End"),

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<sup>43</sup> <http://edu.people.com.cn/n/2013/0503/c116076-21359059.html>.

the “God of Quiz” knowledge (*wusijiao-zhanshen*), Tan Yue, is always mentioned as being a student at Peking University, the highly desired choice of all college entrance exam-takers. Yet the quizzes in which he excelled do not represent the substantial content of his education. Tan’s education at Peking University is an easily recognizable symbol which fabricates his winner’s role and symbolically justifies his victories. In all cases, no matter whether the bond between education status and the individual’s future life is strengthened or broken by participating in the reality shows, such a bond is reiterated – what these shows have presented is cases for public discussions similar to those of Lu Buxuan’s case.

In addition to the status symbol of the state education system, JSTV’s reality television shows also publicly sanction the methods of state education. As mentioned before, because of the intense competition for educational resources and the exclusivity of the college entrance examination, the *Gaokao*-takers are supposed to learn all that is tested. The skills to understand and memorize are also the ones that will determine whether one can win in the game shows and quiz shows. To make the point more explicitly, the web-team of JSTV publishes the scope and pool of the quiz questions their shows select. This apparently encourages preparation for the quiz before going on the show, meaning that prospective participants need only to memorize and understand the resources available, which is how the game is run and is the same method used in preparation for examinations throughout school. In this sense, the quiz shows are a continuation of the exam habits of the nation, and also a confirmation of the legitimacy of such a habit. One participant confessed during the quiz show that she had prepared for three months for the show, going through the pool of questions and studying their scope. At the moment she knew that she had lost, she could not restrain her tears because all that effort did not help her get to the next stage – of the show and of her life. This is not a singular case. In fact, the top item on a *Baidu* search with the show’s name in Chinese typed in as a keyword is the pool of questions and strategy to prepare for the show.

Because of the proximity of the quiz show’s method to the state education system’s method, the reality television also triggered reflections about improving pedagogical model among high school teachers. As Nianfeng Zhang exemplifies in his paper on improving the pedagogical method by inspirations from “Yizhan-Daodi”, he argues that the competition and repetition way of education in



“Yizhan-Daodi” is an “efficient and superior method that should be incorporated into high school education” (30).

The scope of the quizzes and the boundary of knowledge in JSTV’s reality television shows also echo the content of the state education system. The borders of knowledge are made more visible through the shows. This is not to suggest that the quizzes match the state education system but that their borders of knowledge correspond. Literature and history from the classical period are the primary areas for the quizzes. Modern history and literature seldom appear because of their political ambiguity. Physics and chemistry is tested in the same way as in secondary school examinations (the exact questions on the exam sheet were presented in one “*Yizhan-Daodi*” episode featuring several teen contestants). The rest of the questions are common sense to those who live an urban lifestyle. A revival of the much downgraded humanities<sup>44</sup> has gained a position in these shows. For example, during the dating shows, if the participants exhibit their knowledge of classical literature, it is guaranteed that they will not be rejected by the audience on that specific point. In the quiz shows, the participants are interviewed before the quizzes start – such a procedure displays the participants’ education background. Being “bookish” and learned in history or literature is an admired characteristic and is recognized as a potential advantage to winning the game. These shows reiterate the power to judge what is considered a respected education background and knowledge structure: as irrelevant as the scope of knowledge is to the everyday lives of city people, the bond between knowledge and urban living is presented as natural.

The normalized relations between the legitimate sources of respected education and respect in life justify the rewards – those who put in the effort to prepare for the game should be rewarded with what everyone else desires. The shows exhibit justice and fairness in rewarding those who understand the pre-designed course of action and the required hard work to achieve the desired result. Absurd as it might sound, the display of such knowledge is much desired,

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<sup>44</sup> In the Chinese state education system, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of science subjects, such as mathematics, physics, biology, and chemistry. The preference of the sciences over the humanities also appears in the entrance criteria for most subjects: as the saying goes, “If one cannot do well in science subjects, one goes to pick humanities subjects.” In this saying, there is no vice-versa for the humanities. This is the commonly known downgrading of the humanities partly as a result of the needs of economic development.

especially when its practical use is disappearing in real life. Being book smart is once again popular because it allows hard-working people to be rewarded with promises of a better future.

The difference between news coverage and JSTV's quiz shows on cases of education status and well-being in urban life is that the latter makes the passage from education to a good future more visible by awarding the participants and publicly sanctioning the imaginations of the future. The awards are usually in the form of home appliances. In this narrative, quiz winners not only win a quiz or beat other participants but also acquire a piece of home equipment and a piece of the future through their efforts. If the participants intend to give up during the quiz, this narrative states similarly that they are abandoning an opportunity for future advancement. Though the competition-and-reward form of the game makes it obvious that the show is overimposing certain discourses about education, the fact is, as I have shown, that the participants *want* to be co-opted and the audience *wants* to see people co-opted and succeed through it.

This *want* of co-optation mobilizes the participants (and audiences in the case of reality television) to take courses of action that coherently fit into the game. Participants belabor themselves to practice for the games. The quiz shows' question pools have become a business of profit-making online: files of the question pools are among the top search results of the quiz shows on *Baidu*, and strategies about how to win the games are sold like reference books for state education. The outcome of this business is a pre-designed course of action toward the single goal of winning the show, and this goal of winning is connected to a sense of pride related to having a better future in store. This force of mobilization is taken advantage of by JSTV to draw online influence: blogs and websites are set up dedicated to the "strategies" of winning the game, and concrete tactics, such as memorizing the answers or dressing up according to the code of the show, are among the top themes of these blogs. JSTV has set up a *weibo* (mini-blog) on *sina.com* for each of its reality shows. The main blog for this channel has over 4 million subscribed fans. By 2013, Jiangsu Satellite TV had the largest number of total subscribers for all of its blogs among the provincial satellite channels.

From "literati" to "intellectual," these symbols of elite education in China have a history of over 2500 years, and the image of being book smart in these reality television shows is mythified by its superficial similarity to both, as well as

to its critical difference. Devoted to learning, assertive, and sometimes idealistic toward social development, the book-smart participants in these reality television shows concentrate exclusively on their own personal advancement rather than being a scholar or using their knowledge to change society. But how personal development is actually promoted and actualized in reality by being book smart is unclear. It is notable that the link between being book smart and being successful in the future is weak. In fact, individual advancement is also a myth: the process of development is replaced by the interaction between the reality shows and the audience, and by the input and participation of ordinary people. Furthermore, the same process is repeated every week for years; the hope for an improved future urban life is almost superstitiously linked to being learned. This apparently improbable superstition in a modernized state like China is not rare. Before the 2014 college entrance examination, the Confucius Temple and Imperial College Museum in Beijing issued “must have” items, such as “champion pens” and stationery products that had been specially “blessed” by the temple to augment luck.<sup>45</sup> The usual justification of such superstition is the fear of not conforming to the majority and the imagined risk of failing. Similarly, the myth of personal advancement and acquiring knowledge defined by the state education system is sustained through cultural imaginations supplied by the media. The symbolic status of the state education system and the promise of a desired future life are strengthened, much to the liking of the audiences who call for such maintenance. Threatening the symbolic status of the state education system that the cities’ populations have relied on for their futures is also a threat in itself; the mythification of the state education system protects them from such a threat.

## 2. *Street Smart*

What is missing in this discourse about the relation between state education and personal advancement is the widely conceived discourse on *knowledge society*, which is knowledge that is generated for the general well-

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<sup>45</sup> Anonymous. “Mainland Businesses Cash in on the All-important *Gaokao*.” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), 27 May 2010: 10.

being and economic advancement of a society,<sup>46</sup> in which the practicality of knowledge is emphasized. That is, whether the state education system can practically help build the urban future is not mentioned. Rather, the discourse on knowledge society infiltrates the discursive construction of another kind of knowledge, namely being street smart.

I use the phrase “street smart” to denote a group of popularized categories of knowledge or skills that focus on their practicality in the everyday lives of urban residents. This group, “*Zhihui*” (智慧, literally, “wisdom”), is used with modifiers such as “*zhichang-zhihui*” (职场智慧, “wisdom at work”), “*shangchang-zhihui*” (商场智慧, “wisdom for business”), and “*qingchang-zhihui*” (情场智慧, “wisdom in relationships”) to specialize the practical aspects of urban living. To grasp the commonality of this group and the contrast with the state education system’s “book smart” group, I will use the term “street smart” with the cultural specifications of the Chinese context.

## From Intellectual to Businessman

In 2000, the commercial success of the translated versions of Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence Others & How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* and Robert Kiyosaki’s *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* in China signified a new trend in a category generally referred to as *Li-Zhi* (励志) books (books of inspirations). This vaguely defined category started to take shape as a system of knowledge after the demand by urban populations who needed practical guidance on what is usually referred to as “how to succeed in life and in a career” in the sprawling cities in China. In addition to books related to examinations and the state education system, this growing sector of *Li-Zhi* books has become a cash cow of commercial presses and bookshops. By 2012, on a list of the top 10 translated bestselling non-fiction books in China, a ranking compiled by the *New York Times Style Magazine*, four titles were from the *Li-Zhi* category<sup>47</sup>: *The Secret* (ranked second after *Steve Jobs*), *Rip It Up: The Radically New Approach to*

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<sup>46</sup> See knowledge society discussed in the context of China. Burrows, Glen, Damon Drummond, and Maris Marinsons. “Knowledge Management in China.” *Communications of the ACM – Transforming China*. 48.4, April 2005: 73-76.

<sup>47</sup> <http://cn.tmagazine.com/books/20131022/t22chinabook/>.

*Changing Your Life* (ranked fourth), *Dale Carnegie's Lifetime Plan for Success* (ranked seventh), and *Life without Limits: Inspiration for a Ridiculously Good Life* (ranked eighth). Chinese copies and adaptations soon followed. Different adaptations authored by Chinese professionals and writers are more focused on the applicability of the “philosophy” explained in their books, compared to the English originals. Styling, manners, and management are among the popular adaptations. Original works authored in Chinese also market themselves as problem-solvers for living and working in the urban context in China. One recommended book on the China Publishing Group’s website, tagged “psychology,” *Learn Guanxi (relationships) Management in Your 20s, or Get Stuck in Your 30s*, for instance, illustrated this amalgamate of “psychology,” “sociology,” “etiquette,” and “Chinese philosophy” in one straightforward title that is especially tuned to Chinese society.<sup>48</sup>

It is difficult to categorize these books with a category name. From the perspective of the commercial presses and bookshops, how to categorize and shelf these books are merely tactics of marketing. According to the China Publishing Group Corporation, a national level publishing company which owns 40 presses, this vaguely named category of *Li-Zhi* could consist of “psychology,” “successology (*Chenggongxue* 成功学),” “life management,” “philosophy,”<sup>49</sup> and even self-help books. However, the tags of “psychology” and “philosophy” have different connotations from that of the traditional connotations in Western library systems. For example, the newest translated bestseller by Richard Wiseman, *Rip It up: The Radically New Approach to Changing Your Life*, is categorized as philosophy. Despite the tag of academic labels which indicate a high level of erudition, the content is completely devoid of any mention of knowledge created and defined by academia. The other difference between the “knowledge” in *Li-Zhi* books and that of academics and professionals is that the knowledge in the former is delivered through case-based descriptions and applicable steps, for instance, “the five steps to dressing like an elite.” The purpose of mentioning the phenomenon is not to judge whether the categorization adheres to conventional standards; rather, the phenomenon is a sign that a new system of discourse on knowledge is forming, a system of discourse on high performativity and

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<sup>48</sup> <http://book.dajianet.com/1587998/?validated=true>.

<sup>49</sup> <http://book.cnpubg.com/?app=book&controller=book&action=newbooks&typeid=194>.

materiality. The diversion to the trend of popular non-fiction in China is an illustration of the changing discursive field on the making of knowledge that can be easily performative.

This new formation of knowledge through discourses on success and life management is contingent on the rise of the bourgeois-intellectual and the sprawling cities specific to the Chinese urbanization process. After Deng Xiaoping's 1992 visit to Southern China to reemphasize the priority of economic development in the aftermath of the political movement in 1989, intellectuals in China started to rethink their roles, with a special interest in personal economic pursuit<sup>50</sup> that Hao Zhidong termed "the bourgeoisification and professionalization of intellectuals."<sup>51</sup> This process is characterized by increasing entrepreneurship and professionalization among intellectuals who, on the one hand, co-opted state economic policies, and on the other hand, took advantage of them. The money-making pursuit of these new professionals transformed from previous intellectuals, for instance, can be seen in their efforts to earn extra cash by publishing popular books (like those previously mentioned) and teaching in business institutions.<sup>52</sup> Concurrent with the speeding-up of urbanization started in the same period, these new intellectuals, dressed in business attire<sup>53</sup> and with professional insights, quickly became the role models for a population struggling in the overcrowded and competitive urban environment. This adds to the elite status in the discursive field of the knowledge and skills represented by the intellectual businessmen.

The success of the intellectual businessman is seen as a ramification of individual caliber: from grass-root intellectual to successful entrepreneur, the intellectual businessmen relate closely to the grass-roots urban working class and white collar professionals, while remaining a crucial distance from them in order to be their mentors and role models. This set the stage for the trend of popular "success-ology" and life management in media products.

The transition from intellectuals to businessmen at the turn of the century is characterized by the discourse that knowledge is more practical than academic,

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<sup>50</sup> Hao Zhidong, *Intellectuals at a Crossroads: The Changing Politics of China's Knowledge Workers*. New York: The State University of New York Press, 2003, 122, 213.

<sup>51</sup> Hao. *Intellectuals at a Crossroads*, 208.

<sup>52</sup> Hao Zhidong offered three convincing cases on this practice of professionals in China. Hao. *Intellectuals at a Crossroads*, 213-219.

<sup>53</sup> Professionals of all areas, including professors and engineers, joined the business ranks as well. Hao. *Intellectuals at a Crossroads*, 212.

which especially mirrors the practicality in business and career-building. Knowledge constructed in such circumstances is not confined to carefully defined and systemized knowledge created by academia but is loosely connected by its practicality and applicability, with the aura of its authors' elite status in society. Becoming street smart by acquiring knowledge of this kind is a "short-cut" to the "success in life" promised by the discourse on knowledge. The question then is how this discourse materializes.

### Signifiers of Success

The performative aspect of the discourse on being knowledgeable about life and business is the premise of an assured symbolic success, which also means that no failure is real. Materialized through print, audio-visual materials, and online resources, the discourse on knowledge can be referred to as practical guidelines in social situations, including the constructed situations in the game shows, dating shows, career shows, and quiz shows produced by JSTV. As explained in the theoretical framework section of this thesis, the merit of Foucault's concept of discourse is that discourse operates not merely through inclusion/exclusion but, rather, more effectively through the performativity and materiality of discourse. Viewed in this light, the discourse on knowledge of a practical kind has the advantage of being materialized both in television and in the imaginary future life. The "reality" elements, including real reactions in a pre-designed setting, as well as the artificially constructed parts of the reality television shows, form a quasi-reality situation which at the same time both instructs and normalizes: instructs on how to behave in a designed situation and normalizes such "legitimate" behavior as being natural.

Visualization and verbalization are two ways to perform the embodiment of the desired qualities. In the end, what is being naturalized is the practice of acquiring certain skills and characteristics, especially those which can be visualized and performed on the stage, such as a taste for fashion and food, specialized skills such as dancing, or the ability to "penetrate" other people's minds (as a social skill). The signifier of the successful intellectual businessman is also present in reality television: the mentor (*laoshi*). The mentors are made up of

university professors, writers of popular *Li-Zhi* books, comedians, television directors, or a combination of these categories, all dressed up in accordance with the fashion code of the shows (see Illustrations 5 and 6). In the dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*,” only the male guests who dress up in urban fashions and articulate their name and age (without stuttering) will be recognized as competent in living an individual life. The female guest, Sun Yali, who is especially articulate in expressing her opinion and who continuously attracts attention by her visual self-presentation, is given the title “Professor Sun” by the dating show host, Meng Fei. The title is an acknowledgement of her “knowledge” of how to live well in a city. In the game show “*Fei Dei Must Watch*,” the proof of intelligence is only to show that one can read other people’s lies and make independent judgments through articulate speech. Personal advancement and success are marked by the observable traits of being articulate and visually outstanding. In the career show “*Tuoying-erchu*,” the theme is for the participants to show progress through the help of experts, which centers only on the style, not the essential skills, of the profession. In a word, the embodiment of a certain *style* that is usually associated with the image of a successful intellectual businessman (the image of the mentors) is marked as the achievable means to succeed – it is a simplification that compensates for the feelings of insecurity and discontent.



Illustration 5. Mentors (Zhenyu Jiang and Yan Liu) of the game show “*Fei Dei Will Watch*”





Illustration 6. Mentors (Han Huang and Wanning Chen) of the dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*”

Success is overwritten by its signifiers in the specific Chinese context – such a term as “success-ology” describes not the complex system of success in all kinds of profession but the simple collection of the styles, or markers, of the successful. Both “acquirable” (or, in the logic of the market, consumable), the abilities to articulate and to be visually pleasing are the two traits which are marketed as elements of “success-ology” in the *Li-zhi* books on the market. The matching scheme of the popular book market and reality television is not coincidental: the skills that can be popularized are the ones which can bring foreseeable changes to life and can be acquired through short-term practice. JSTV’s reality television shows cater especially to the need to see these foreseeable changes performed on the stage, in a playful way. The entertainment element is imbued into the pleasure of watching the changes in the participants, which justifies the similar efforts of the population who strive to achieve equivalent changes.

As opposed to the discourse on the symbolic status of the state education system, the discourse on success also highlights independency: the lack of resources to achieve success through the state education system is compensated by the possibility of change that is dependent on a person’s will to change. What is left out, however, is the systematic difficulties of living in urban China. These difficulties are reduced to the popular notion of “chance” or “life opportunity” (*renshen-jiyu*) and just fade away from the screen.

In addition, the discourse on the “knowledge of success-ology”, inter-textual media products also incorporate JSTV’s reality televisions into the discourse on the knowledge of health and good-living by the government. Health magazines and self-help books utilize the content of JSTV’s career show “*Tuoyingerchu*” and dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*” to educate the public about the importance of knowledge on healthy life-style. “Experts’ advice”, for instance, is the language used in magazines to educate the public about the principles of success as shown in the reality televisions. In the magazine *Health Review* (by Zhejiang Institute of Health Education), scenarios from “*Feicheng-Wurao*” were studied as cases to illustrate “principles” and “correct expectations” of dating and relationship (Zhiguo Ma 44-46). In the magazine *Health Horizon* by the Ministry of Health of P.R. China, JSTV’s dating show and career show is mentioned as positive examples of legitimized ways to learn how “healthy personal image” affect a person’s well-being and social prospects. (Zheng and Lei, 30) Cases from the dating show are presumed to be real and pedagogical. Controversial cases, such as the case of the “BMW girl”, are concluded to be “unhealthy”, and thus excluded from the legitimate range of knowledge on health. The renewed inter-textual relationship between JSTV’s reality televisions and the government discourses reflects the co-optation of the discourse on knowledge into the official discourse.

### 3. *The Self-Aware*

Rather more “consumable” than “acquirable,” success is performed by the embodiment of a certain style, and the promise of success is inscribed with signifiers of the successful. Those who fail to demonstrate or to perform the style of success are deemed the outliers of city life, unless they become “self-aware” of their situation as an outlier. Such is the way that all counter-discourses are incorporated into the previous two discourses.

The discourse of “the self-aware” is both a strategy of JSTV to harmonize conflicts and a way of encoding potential counter-discourses. First, as discussed in Chapter 1, reality television, with its competition format, abides by certain constraints on the degree of competitiveness of the game, that is, how much

competition is allowed. As conflict and struggle are integral parts of the competition format, the production team must strive to retain the confrontations (because confrontations attract attention) while still “harmonizing” the conflicts. That is to say, they cannot directly adopt the rhetoric of “winner” and “loser” but, rather, they can assign different identities that are sensitive to the social status of the participants. By describing those who do not fit the game as “self-aware” (*zishizhiming*, 自知之明), which follows the rhetoric of the Chinese virtue of being aware of one’s own situation/status/ability, the reality shows actually avoid a direct distinction between loser and winner.

Second, counter-discourses become unthreatening once they are recognized as outside of the boundary of proper knowledge. The moment of verbal recognition is the point where participants confess that they are aware of their outsider position. Thus, the threat of their different lifestyles and social values also becomes less challenging. The verbal recognition of the self-aware is marked by typical sentences starting with “I know that I do not have...,” “I understand that I cannot convince you of what I am saying...,” and “I have been living a life like this for years...” In the dating shows, when participants are unable to perform the desired traits of being successful in city life (such as having a car, owning a flat, speaking confidently in standard Mandarin, and dressing according to the code), they will be situated in a position of self-defense. The consequences of being self-defensive are of two kinds: first, participants will be immediately ousted if they rebut, and second, they will be accepted as at least self-aware and thus will still have the opportunity to improve if they do not rebut. The rule is, as summarized by the host of the dating show and also used by the host of the game show, that one need not rebut “friendly suggestions” because they are simply for the participants’ own good. Visual presentation of the first consequence is usually a shot of the facial expression of disapproval of the participant who makes the incoherent discourse, a shot for public criticism to aim at, whereas the presentation of the second consequence is usually support from the host and the expert. Potential counter-discourses, thus, become something the participants should be shameful and conscious of. Therefore, the category of self-awareness is a mechanism to define an alternative of knowledge which enwraps all the potential incoherent elements in the first two categories.

#### 4. *Conclusion: The Myth of Progress?*

The discourse on knowledge centers on one theme: to progress in life. The objective of voyeuristic desire is shifted to the fulfillment of the purpose of social learning and of the promise of a good life. As the reality television shows symbolically strengthen the dominant status of the state education system and mobilize the audiences and the participants toward the practice of a pre-designed course of action, they make the promise of individual progress in living an urban life. The opacity of this promise is realized, however, through the consumption of the signifiers of living a good urban life (embodied by the intellectual businessmen who act as mentors in the reality television shows). Thus, the abstract promise of individual progress is materialized. This is the synthesis of the two seemingly incoherent discourses on being book smart and on being street smart.

The premise of such discourse is a present of lacking and a future of promise. The assumed context of the discourse is urban China, excluding transitional and rural areas because of their seeming irrelevancy in the process of urbanization, erasing the trace of rural origins in city areas.

The linear progressivity of individual development is actually enacted through a series of mythification, self-denial, and disguise. These discourses, if not convincing for the subject, surely will cause confusion, and thus encircle the subject with limited choices, all for individual development while being non-threatening to the current social orders or the promised good future life. The promise of the exclusive state education system and of the imitation of the style of the successful are structures of the thinkable ways of progress that limit the individual choices of lifestyle. The inequality and inefficiency of the state education system and the consumption of mere style of the successful are disguised by the promise of a good future. The responsibility of progress falls on the shoulders of individuals who follow the universal urban dream of the future, while the myth of progress is substantiated by the practical step-by-step performed guidance in JSTV's reality television shows.

The mythification of individual advancement comes with another political implication: discrimination against those who are also victimized in the discourse on the "inequality of educational resources" and who lack the traits of success.

Being “street smart” uniformly results from the experiences of living in urban settings, while being “book smart” is strictly limited to those who have access to formal education. The systematic discrimination against those who do not have the means to visualize and verbalize will thus cause them to be excluded from the show. Participants from rural areas or having a rural background will be tested directly through the third category, “the self-aware,” carrying with them one more layer of awareness about the potential city life they are not yet part of. But with the construction of knowledge even on the subjective choice of an urban life, such as taste and lifestyle, certain groups are deprived of the imaginary urban future in the more latent way of erasure. Such political implications are sealed by the discourse on the self-aware, which locates the counter-discourses and alternative lifestyles on the defensive and reactive position – the alternative cannot be articulated unless it is recognized as the un-self-aware or conforms to the dominant and becomes self-aware.

## Chapter 4. Discourse on Family Ethics

The previous two chapters have revealed a paradox: on the one hand, as portrayed in JSTV's reality television shows, the individualistic progressive path is the only possible and imaginable road to the future, where competition for resources (and indeed the competition for the scarce awards given in JSTV's reality television shows) is inevitable; on the other hand, the harmonious development and resource-sharing of the community (usually propagated in terms of nationalism and family ethics) requires the mitigation of any conflicts of interest and overheated competitions that might result in elements of societal instability, such as the exposure of income discrepancy. As the previous chapters have proceeded to the current one, one question is imminent: can the inconsistency of the discourses on the ethics of living an urban life be explained, or do JSTV's reality television shows create a coherent code of ethics that disguises the inconsistency of individualistic developmental goals?

JSTV's reality television shows were popularized amid the circulation and propagation of the doctrine of "building a harmonious socialist society" (构建社会主义和谐社会) launched by the National People's Congress in 2004. The keyword "harmonious society" has been the main guidance for the practices of various institutions, including provincial-level television networks. According to a theoretical handbook on this strategy, *Shehui zhuyi Hexie Shehui Lun (On Harmonious Socialist Society)* by the president of the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China (the CPS of the CPC), Junru Li, the problem of the current society in China is the segregation and conflicts of different social groups. As Li defines it, this problem has developed

because the country is still in the preliminary stage of developing a *socialist market economy (Shehui-zhuyi Shichang-jingji)*, which means that because the market mechanism is immature, different interest groups have begun to appear and motives of profit-making have begun to take over; therefore, unstable and inharmonious elements have been growing, giving birth to massive and complex contradictions and conflicts (99)<sup>54</sup> (my translation).

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<sup>54</sup> In his handbook, Li defines the primary problem of society as inadequacy of the enforcement of social justice and the segregation of different social groups. Conflicts between the interests of different social groups are considered the obstacles of building a harmonious society. The

If, as shown in Chapter Two, the developmental path is strictly limited to the imagined interior space of a city, then the individual, instead of the community, is the unit of action. The focus on individual progress in life in JSTV's reality television shows highlights the conflicts between personal interests. These conflicts of the participants' individual interests presented a controversial debate to a public that has been unaccustomed to having an open discussion on acute social issues, such as income discrepancy and housing problems. In fact, the reactions triggered by the early episodes of the dating show "*Feicheng-Wurao*" (from January 2010 to May 2010) were largely centered on disharmonizing social issues, instead of on the topic of dating. The expanded range of golden hour reality television shows on JSTV has taken advantage of the presumable needs of the public to construct the language and imagery with which to discuss the social issues related to urbanization in the form of game-playing. As explained in Chapter Three, different from the early episodes of the dating show, the reality television shows later produced by JSTV adopted a positive tone about the amelioration of social problems, featuring the prospect of progress and practical guidelines to improve the appearance of living (by attaining the signifiers of success and better living). The "hope" of attaining the imagined good individual future life as presented in JSTV's reality television shows, however, has to face the realistic choices to be made in the situations designed by these shows, such as choices in dating, job-seeking, and competing for awards – in other words, the values of a harmonious society and family may often cross those of individual progress. Guided by the *mainstream*<sup>55</sup> cultural doctrine of a harmonious society, how are competitions and conflicts "harmonized" in these reality television shows? How should one act when such conflicts between the individual, the family, and the community happen in the shows?

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following translated excerpt from the book serves as an illustration of the above point: "The disharmonious elements of a society in economic transformation: Since China became a socialist society, because of the complex historical factors, the problem of society is primarily reflected in the increasing discrepancy between the needs of economic growth and the lack of available means of production.... Therefore, economic development is the primary task of the party.... At the same time, because the country is still in the preliminary stage of the socialist market economy, which means that the market mechanism is immature, different interest groups have begun to appear, and motives of profit-making have begun to take over, and therefore the unstable and inharmonious elements have been growing, giving birth to massive and complex struggles and conflicts" (Li 99).<sup>55</sup> Mainstream, as in the "mainstream culture" defined by the central authority as the guidelines for mass media products. Please refer to Xian Zhou and Kang Liu (16).

At this point of the thesis, the discussion on linear progressivity needs to shift to an analysis of the defining characteristics of what is considered *individual*<sup>56</sup> and, more specifically, *development*. Who the acting unit is and what its role is constrain the discourse on how to act. Moreover, what and who marks the characteristics of being an individual, and how is the relationship between individuals and the community defined? It is in this aspect that JSTV's reality television shows present their novelty and contributions to the discourse on individual actions in contemporary China. Before going into a discussion on JSTV, I will delineate the discourse related to individual actions in the official discourse and its counter-discourse.

Individuals and the community are bridged by the reference to and the mediation of the family, both in the official discourses on a "harmonious society" and in popular cultural products that seem to contradict the promotion of "harmony." First, in Junru Li's book published by the CPS, he defines "harmony" (和谐 *He-xie*) in terms of *he* (和) and *xie* (谐) in Confucius and Taoism philosophy: *he* means the well-kept balance between different elements and *xie* is the dialectic relationships between conflicting elements that ultimately coordinate in Taoism (1-6). This definition acknowledges the existence of differences but actually highlights the natural state of harmony into which ultimately all conflicting elements will merge. On a practical level, Li emphasizes the reference of family, borrowing the Confucius analogy of the management of the family as the management of the nation (8). Hence, in this discourse, a "harmonious society" can be achieved through the management of the family unit, which is composed of responsible individuals. The discourse on "harmony" exemplifies that although differences may appear to be conflicting, they will ultimately become harmonized if society is run in the same way as each member playing his or her role in a family.

Second, mainstream culture supplies concrete stories that support the discourse of a "harmonious society." In 2007 and 2008, a *mainstream* soap opera by the famous director Baogang Zhao, "*Fen Dou*" (奋斗, meaning

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<sup>56</sup> A distinction of the use of the terms "individual" and "individuality" is needed. Individual here is not directly linked to the widely-known idea of individuality and individualism in the West. Individuality has a long philosophical history that can be traced back to the Enlightenment period. The history-loaded term of individuality will be avoided in this chapter so that the arguments can be focused on the idea of the individual as portrayed in popular media.



“fighting/working”), depicted the struggles of two young couples who were trying to establish their lives in a fictional cosmopolitan city in China. Though the title denoted that the story would be about the personal growth and success path of the young male protagonist, the main story line was actually determined, ironically, by an incident in which the male protagonist, an unsuccessful engineer, discovered through his adversary that he had a wealthy father. His later success was attributed to the pride of continuing the family business enterprise of creating buildings that benefited the community. Hence, being established in cosmopolitan China was tied to the expansion of family networks. The individuality in “*Fen Dou*,” as embodied by the young engineer’s aspirations for success, is constantly contained by his family relationships. After the polarization created by “*Fen Dou*,” another popular television soap opera by the same director, this time broadcast on China Central Television Channel 1’s (CCTV-1) golden hour,<sup>57</sup> titled “My Youth” (我的青春谁做主), became a national topic in 2009. This soap opera flipped to the other gender: it featured three female cousins who also faced choices of careers and marriage in their 20s, and whose parents and grandmother always negotiated with their decisions on their future lives. It presented the question of who should decide the choice of a youngster when she faces difficulties or struggles in life, as the title (which can be translated as “my youth, who decides”) suggests. As daughters and granddaughters, the three girls are constantly caught up in the choice between independence and dependence on financial and social help from the elders of the family. The answer this soap opera offers to such a question is that family support and advice from the elders are always a reliable source of future comfort in life. The soap opera depicted the failures of the three girls when they pursued their own courses of action in establishing their lives, in which they ended up waiting to be helped or rescued by their parents and grandmother. The failures were not only depicted as insolvency, however, but also were represented by disrupting social orders, such as selling fake doctor’s notes to university students (the youngest cousin, Xiaoyang), faking university offer letters (the second cousin, Pili), and interfering with the course of justice (the oldest cousin, Qingchu). The happy endings, where all three girls are dragged back to the right path of life under the guidance and financial support of the family, echo the

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<sup>57</sup> The golden hour of CCTV-1 (19:30–22:00) is the main channel and time for broadcasting *mainstream* soap operas.

ending of “*Fen Dou*.” The centrality of family in both soap operas, though never made explicit, is in fact the underlining linkage between individual actions and the general well-being of society. Self-defined, independent individuality is always compromised once confronted with choices about the well-being of family and society. In this context, individuals in a family, instead of independent individuals, are the basic unit of action toward success.

The ideals of the family did not go unchallenged. In 2007 and 2010, two controversial soap operas “*Shuang Mian Jiao*” (双面胶) and “*Dwelling Narrowness*” (蜗居), each adopted from the writer Liu-liu’s two novels of the same names, were both suspended after being broadcast on provincial-level channels because they endorsed counter-discourses. “*Shuang Mian Jiao*” depicted the conflicts of a young married couple stirred by the husband’s mother, who opposes the couple’s lifestyle because it goes against her doctrine of traditional family roles. The interference of the husband’s mother, who is the embodiment of traditional family virtues, introduced unstable elements into the well-to-do couple’s relationship, causing their final divorce. “*Dwelling Narrowness*” further deconstructed family ethics and exposed their inefficiency in bringing neither financial security nor social stability to the couple and the community, whereas success must only be achieved by individual effort. For “*Dwelling Narrowness*,” SARFT ordered the ending of the story to be modified so that the female protagonist Hai-zao, who broke family ethics by becoming the mistress of a government official, is punished – she loses her uterus during an operation and moves to the U.S. (as banishment from Chinese society) – which was permitted to be shown on screen. Families, as depicted in these two shows, are the source of personal burdens and social troubles. Both soap operas, though providing a counter-discourse, do not go beyond the paradigm of family ethics in the decision-making and actions of individuals.

In comparison with the above discourses, the early episodes of JSTV’s dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*,” in 2010, were the first successful and massively influential media products that actually went beyond the paradigm of family ethics. The novelty of this dating show was not only its innovation in the format of reality television, but, more importantly, in its recognition of an individual that is self-defined, without any reference to family or community. This recognition of

a self-defined individual was unprecedented. In the reality television shows preceding “*Feicheng-Wurao*,” including the talent shows by Hunan Satellite TV and the career shows and talent shows by Dragon TV, though the participants sometimes competed as individuals, the self-determined individual was never put to the test in the reality television shows’ scenarios. The direct confrontation between community- and family-centered ethics and self-defined individuals in “*Feicheng-Wurao*” opened up a new way of gaining both economic benefits and political clout. I will elaborate on this type of self-defined individual (and its demise) in JSTV’s reality television shows in the following section.

### 1. *The Recognition of the Self-Driven Individual*

When JSTV achieved the highest viewers’ ratings in its history (and soon after the highest ratings among all provincial-level television networks in 2010), the “superstar” show “*Feicheng-Wurao*” was branded by the modifier “*xin pai*,” which meant a “new mode/style” dating show. As the keyword “*xin*” or “new” aroused the expectations of something unprecedented and modern, the show offered controversial open discussions on decision-making by young women. Under the seemingly unthreatening theme of dating, a theme which supposedly should lead to the establishment of families, the show strived to feature young women who expressed themselves as being self-determined, independent, and assertive. Having a self-driven identity and being capable of independent decision-making was highlighted. The confrontation between the self-driven individual and social conformity to the role of women in family and society revealed the split facets of the urban condition. This feature was understandably part of JSTV’s marketing strategy (this particular feature was eliminated after JSTV was ordered to suspend the show), but the meaning of the content went beyond the realm of branding.

Ma Nuo was one of the most discussed female participants of the show (see Chapter Two), as she was best remembered by her notorious statement, “I would rather cry in a BMW [than laugh on a bicycle].”<sup>58</sup> However, this statement

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<sup>58</sup> See the *New York Times* article, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/arts/television/chinese-tv-dating-shows-day-day->

did not dominate the discussions about her until the show was suspended. Other statements by Ma Nuo, especially those about self-determination and individuality, were edited after the show's suspension in June 2010. In the early episodes before the suspension, online discussions surrounding Ma Nuo were divergent, some recognizing her originality in articulating the common emotions of women living in an increasingly competitive urban China, and others condemning her because her statements threatened male domination. The modern articulation of femininity and gender politics were topics of both the mass media and academics in 2010 and 2011.<sup>59</sup> Although this is not the place to discuss gender politics, it should be emphasized that these perspectives on discussing Ma Nuo and the novelty of the articulation of female self-determination as an individual in society have been overwritten and erased by the discourse of “mammonism” (拜金, literally, the adoration of money), as will be illustrated in this section.

In the early episodes of “*Feicheng-Wurao*” before the suspension, the host Meng Fei publicly sanctioned Ma Nuo's controversy by laughing them off when criticisms appeared and by allocating time for Ma Nuo to repetitively perform her brand of self-determination. (see Illustration 9). The following are a few of Ma Nuo's utterances, which exemplifies her self-determination and the threat she poses to the primacy of family:

I also hope that my boyfriend will not restrict my activities in the evening – I will go home at the hour I choose to, or, even better, I will decide whether I go home or not (to a male guest who said that *he hoped his girlfriend would not restrict his activity in the evening* – note that the male guest was not criticized for saying the same words that Ma Nuo used).

When I hear you speak, I just want to find a whip and whip you (to a male guest who showed off his eloquence when he introduced himself).

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up.html?\_r=2&ref=china&; *The Washington Post* article, available at, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/04/AR2010070404532.html?wprss=rss\\_world/asia](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/04/AR2010070404532.html?wprss=rss_world/asia); and the *China Beat* article, available at <http://www.thechinabeat.org/?author=1&paged=39>, retrieved on 27 March 2014. *The Washington Post* article confirms the widespread rumors about Ma Nuo, who is marked by her statement about the BMW, whereas the *China Beat* article claims that this statement was actually taken out of context and possibly misread. Similar to these two articles, the keywords following Ma Nuo in both English and Chinese media are always BMW girl or “*baijin*” (“mammonism”).

<sup>59</sup> See Chang Xi's analysis on female stereotypes (2011), Shuangxi Deng's dissertation on the narrative of “*Feicheng-Wurao*” (2011), and Fan Wu's analysis on the values of dating shows in China (2011).

I have guessed so (in response to Meng Fei's question, 'You are again chosen the desired girl by the male guest, so what is on your mind?').

I like his chest hair – so sexy! (to a male guest who was a bodybuilder and trainer).

Ma Nuo's utterances brought about an unfamiliar sense of *relationship* instead of *family* and *domesticity*. In such a relationship, individual needs are recognized instead of being subdued by the family ethics of the Confucius culture. The psychological fulfillment of needs in a Confucian family, according to Walter Slote, are ensured by a "benevolent, protective" (39) male and the female's "nurturance" (39), which fulfills the "emotional necessity of affection" (40) and "security in an extended family" (38). By asserting the choices of an individual not responsive to the expected emotions of a potential wife, Ma Nuo shocked the audience. The embodiment of an individual female in her sexualized body (see Illustration 9) broke down the linkage between the attractiveness of a female participant and her social role in a family. The unutterable word "sex" was easily fitted into her colloquial speech and to her image on stage.

Ma Nuo was adored by many male guests – among the 18 episodes in which she appeared, she was chosen the favorite girl by male guests in six episodes. In the narratives of these six love stories, Ma Nuo was the only protagonist. The dating show featured one male guest who was poor and not appealing in appearance but, nonetheless, claimed he would devote his whole life to Ma Nuo's happiness. He confessed that he did not know how he would do that, but he would do absolutely everything he could to ensure Ma Nuo's happiness. He said, "I am in love with her, and her beautiful big eyes. If I could only just see her in person, my whole life would not be in vain." The love story resembled what Anthony Giddens calls "passionate amour" or "romantic love," which "introduced a narrative into an individual's life" while the telling of the story became "individualized, inserting self and other into a personal narrative which had no particular reference to [a] wider social process" (The Transformation of Intimacy 39-40). Ma Nuo was presented not as a mother, a daughter, or a wife, but as something unfamiliar and exotic, removed from the social routines of women. In this aspect, "*Feicheng-Wurao*" was distinctively modern.

Entwined with the Chinese self-driven individual is the pragmatics of establishing a good life associated with Deng's economic reform. "Black cat or white cat, as long as it catches mice" and "Getting rich is glorious" were the slogans used at the outset of Deng's economic reform to boost the "elite lifestyle" and the "hope of the new riches" (Croll 81). Individual achievements were recognized as the accumulated wealth that allowed for the lifestyle of an elite, which meant "a home of one's own" (Croll 87) and "a car of one's own" (Croll 91). The consumerism of this lifestyle was meant to channel the pride of individualistic achievements that would otherwise be invisible. As Croll rightly pointed out, "For the young, an automobile perhaps more than any other object signified a fast-moving lifestyle and a new-found scene of freedom" (91). The original scene in which Ma Nuo giggled, "I would rather cry in a BMW," seems to demand more explanation than the discourse on "mammonism" offers. The utterance appeared in an episode in which a male guest expressed that "living with me would be like riding a bicycle." He had chosen Ma Nuo as the most desired date and asked her the final question, "Would you like to ride a bicycle with me often?" If read in relation to her character of being a self-driven individual, the BMW statement would mean that she recognized the ambition of individual achievements and the aspirations of self-determined freedom. In addition, the usually not mentioned consequent scene following Ma Nuo's BMW statement showed the male guest persisting in pursuing Ma Nuo. He said, "I like girls with inner quality/beauty, not only with outer beauty. I think you possess that inner quality that I am looking for. You live in Beijing, and I am just planning to develop my career in Beijing. So...(end of sentence)." This scene contrasts the demonization of Ma Nuo with the discourse on "mammonism" that will be discussed in the second section of this chapter.

The utterances and the image of Ma Nuo have been reproduced by different female participants on the same show. Her lines, such as, "I want to find a whip and whip you," added to the colloquiality of the show and the online discussions on dating. Ma Nuo was portrayed as young, proud, assertive, and self-determined in the early episodes (January–March 2010), but the demise of this novel image of a self-driven individual came soon after, which will also be discussed in the second section of this chapter.



Illustration 7. Ma Nuo on the stage of “*Feicheng-Wurao*”

The receptions of Ma Nuo’s controversial statements are divergent. During the early episodes, she was constantly chosen as the most desired girl by male guests, despite her iconoclastic statements – she was the superstar on the stage of the dating show. Bloggers followed her statements and even made a bible of them. The discourse on her being materialistic was brought up in one episode (April 7, 2010), when a male guest accused her of “mammonism” because of her statement about the BMW. The male guest interpreted her statement in the following way:

According to your requirement [of having a BMW], you either marry an old established man or a rich kid who depends on [his] rich parents. A sincere young man who is still fighting to establish a life would not fit you. You should be in a beauty contest, not in a sincere dating show, because in a beauty contest, you will be adored by rich people.

The reduction of the spectrum of statements relating to the single discourse on “mammonism” was not incidental. The show broadcast this episode with the keywords “daring young man blasting out the truth.” Criticism of Ma Nuo in mainstream media and online forums followed. Footage from other scenes in which Ma Nuo debated with her challengers was released “by the audience in the studio” who “recorded the real scenes.”<sup>60</sup> Responses to this footage included those supporting Ma Nuo and those against her:

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<sup>60</sup> Footage titled “Ma Nuo being challenged – original video shot in the studio.” It is, however, unclear whether this unofficial video was released by the production team or by the audience in the

Ma Nuo, I support you. You are the only one down to earth (the commenter appeared to be male).

Compared to other pretentious bitches, [Ma Nuo] you are the real character (the commenter appeared to be male).

This male guest is totally nonsensical – coming to a dating [show] not to date but to denigrate women! with that posture of ‘I am *representing the people’s government to condemn you.*’ You think you change women by denigrating them? You are just hiding your self-insufficiency and your lack of self-esteem (gender of the commenter is ambiguous).

These comments acknowledge the conflicts of interest between viewers, especially between the rich and the poor, regarding women’s choices for partners. From the comments above, Ma Nuo is interpreted as being a heroine who stands up and speaks the truth about the inharmonious society against the “pretentious” masses. Negative comments, on the other hand, condemned Ma Nuo for challenging family-centered society:

She is just a *cunt*, not a *woman*. She spreads her legs just for money (gender of the commenter is ambiguous).

You are just a bitch who wants to be famous on TV (gender of the commenter is ambiguous).

Fickle women who love for money, young men suffer to find a wife; high housing prices and wide income discrepancy; the love for money and the chase of fame. All these have changed Chinese women (the commenter appeared to be male).

In the comments above, women are demonized as unstable elements in an orderly society, as they fail to fulfill the role of a traditional, family-oriented character.

Other voices are ironic:

It is kind of easy to be a girl – spread your legs, you get a good life (gender of the commenter is ambiguous).

If she is on a Western dating show, she will be damn popular – but not in China (gender of the commenter is ambiguous).

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studio. The uploader’s identity is questionable because other videos by this uploader contain footage of controversial media events. The footage is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWl4WxR\\_p9A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWl4WxR_p9A).



Despite these divergent comments on Ma Nuo's case online, in the mainstream media, the voices were unified by the discourse on "mammonism."<sup>61</sup> This overwriting of Ma Nuo's statements with the discourse on "mammonism" was concurrent with the suspension and the remaking of the show. The discourse on the linkage between "mammonism" and broken family ethics has hence erased the articulation of self-dependence for female participants.

When Ma Nuo left the stage with a male guest (a middle-aged, divorced man named Zhang Hongkai, with a moderate income and looks), a similar participant named Zhang Yali took her place. With a similar level of popularity as Ma Nuo among the male guests, Zhang also asserted similar ideas of female self-independence. However, Zhang's utterances contained one more twist: instead of using the personal pronoun "I," she often used "we," as in "the girls standing on the stage," speaking not only for herself but also for her companions on the stage of this "*xin pai*" or "new mode" dating show. Likewise, most of her statements were overwritten by the discourse on Zhang being "immoral." She was accused of "mammonism" following the lawsuit filed against her by a male guest. This male guest, after successfully being matched with her on stage, sent Zhang a BMW car. The male guest claimed that the BMW was an engagement gift. After Zhang broke off the engagement with him, the male guest hence said that he wanted the car back, to which Zhang responded in her blog that the gift was voluntarily sent to her, as she thought that he respected her as an individual, not as his fiancé. The male guest sued Zhang and she (not he) was criticized for being "immoral."<sup>62</sup>

On the contrary, self-determined male figures in the dating show were generally popular because of the social expectations of males being the more competitive individuals in a family or a couple. The reference to family and society in such social expectations is not explicitly said but, rather, is ubiquitous. The male participants in the dating show were presented as self-determined individuals *at the present*, who tried to establish themselves as an individual so that they could support a family *in the future*. Male guests were often rejected for being "not self-assured" and "not self-determined." If they were successful, they

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<sup>61</sup> See note 12.

<sup>62</sup> The predominant accusation of Zhang was framed by a Baidu forum message, which commented that Zhang was using "immoral" means to achieve her lowly goals.

were questioned about whether their success was “just inherited from their parents or earned by themselves.”<sup>63</sup> To this question, ironically, male guests defended themselves and stated that their successes were earned by themselves, independent of the support of their families. Again, the distinction between hard work by an individual *at the present* and the imaginations of a good life of a family *in the future* is at work. As one of the popular female guests in the early stage of the dating show, Wei Min straightforwardly exclaimed, “If you (to the male guests) do not have a flat and a car, who would want to date you?” In this context, the individual achievements and self-determination of the male guests is seen as signifiers of the ability to support a future partner.

## 2. *The Re-making of JSTV*

Two consequential events happened as a result of the appearances of Ma Nuo and Zhang Yali on “*Feicheng-Wurao*.” First, Ma Nuo publicly apologized to the audiences on a talk show hosted by Anhui Satellite TV (a provincial-level network), sobbing, stuttering, and looking frightened because of her “misdeeds.” Ma Nuo said that she was “too young of a child” to know that “the misdeeds have brought negative impacts to the society,” and that “from today onwards, I will grow up and work hard.”<sup>64</sup> Opposite of Ma Nuo’s image as an independent, assertive, and proud woman, this vulnerable image of her functioned to compromise the threats of idiosyncratic self-determination. Soon afterward, Ma Nuo was contracted by Anhui Satellite TV.

Second, Zhang Yali, confronted with the media and the lawsuit, stood up for herself to fight for the BMW with the help of her attorney friend. However, similar to Ma Nuo’s appearance on Anhui Satellite TV, in an interview with Sougou.com featuring other “*Feicheng-Wurao*” female guests, Zhang presented herself as a victim of the media and as a vulnerable girl who worked hard to earn her own future. In this context, Ma Nuo and Zhang Yali’s controversial performances on the dating show were taken advantage of by JSTV, and their

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<sup>63</sup> A successful young male guest, Liu Yunchao, appeared to be a perfect date but was challenged by a female guest on the point of whether he earned his success independent of his family.

<sup>64</sup> The video recording of this episode is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYAKbfMOxnI>.

conformity was used by other media outlets to build their own viewers' ratings and reputations. Therefore, both the criticism of the female participants' self-determined individuality and the praise of the male participants' self-motivation confirm the link between the individual and the family, in that individuals behave according to the interests of (building) a family and contributing to the stability of society. In other words, individuals are promoted only when there is a reference to their family role.

In fact, in June of 2010, SARFT issued three regulating documents on the broadcast of dating shows on provincial-level television stations. Following the regulations, *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*) and Xinhua News Agency (the state press agency) condemned JSTV for promoting the overtly-materialistic lifestyles portrayed in the dating show.<sup>65</sup> Echoing the mainstream media's discourse on dating shows, provincial-level media also reacted negatively to the success of JSTV's dating show. In response, JSTV published its support of the regulations on June 23, 2010,<sup>66</sup> and made two main adjustments to its programs. The first change was the overall strategy of the golden hour programs. JSTV created four more reality television shows between 2011 and 2012, covering different aspects of living an urban life, with the main theme of "*qing-gan*" ("feelings/emotions") and "*xing-fu*" ("happiness/well-being"). For instance, among the four new reality television shows, the quiz show "*Yizhan-Daodi*" explicitly differentiated itself from the dating show "*Feicheng-Wurao*" by the hosts' slogan that the show was created for "high taste" people (高端大气上档次),<sup>67</sup> repudiating the "low taste" of the dating show. This message was strengthened when "*Yizhan-Daodi*" employed the newlywed couple Li Hao and Xiaomin as its hosts, who presented themselves as role models for a happy family life. In the process, the show even featured Xiaomin's pregnancy and Li taking care of his wife. Following its success, another quiz show, "Raid the Cage," installed a similar mechanism. The participants of "Raid the Cage" competed as a pair, usually composed of two

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<sup>65</sup> See *Renmin-Ribao*'s report, available at <http://www.ccztv.cn/html/shendubaodao/201006/22-910.html> and *Xinhua News Agency's Xinhua Daily Telegraph* at [http://news.xinhuanet.com/mrdx/2010-06/23/content\\_13726205.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/mrdx/2010-06/23/content_13726205.htm).

<sup>66</sup> See JSTV's response to the regulations on June 13, 2010, available at <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1027/11868805.html>.

<sup>67</sup> This phrase is the first line of a poem by an anonymous author. The poem was widely circulated online through forums and blogs. The poem consists of only adjectives that describe trends in lifestyles in urban China.

family members. This teamwork was equated to family work, whose success could only be shared. In addition to these explicit adjustments of the discourse on the individual and the family, I will illustrate the implicit incorporation of the discourse on individuals and society in the second section of this chapter.

The second change involved the removal of participants who threatened family ethics in the dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*.” This new version replaced its previous brand of “*xin pai*” with “service,” as the host Meng Fei announced, “Welcome to the life-serving show.”<sup>68</sup> The first episode after the resumption of “*Feicheng-Wurao*” was titled “Special Edition: Immigrant Laborers’ Search for Love,” reflecting the anthem of “life-serving” by directly tackling the social issues of immigrants. This episode was timed to air right after the Foxconn tragedy. Self-determined individuality was replaced by the attachment to the development of the nation. Individuals were portrayed as representing an intermediate and transitory stage, which led to becoming established in a community through marriage. In conclusion, the new “life-serving show *Feicheng-Wurao*” marked the erasure of the self-driven individual.

### Exotic Individuals

The controversies and provocations, however, cannot be completely erased because they are the main driver of the viewers’ ratings. Hence, the responsibilities of creating controversies were shifted to the special episodes featuring foreign participants. When “*Feicheng-Wurao*” resumed without the edge of being provocative, the show increased its diversity of formats by including foreign participants and special foreign editions. The responsibility of creating confrontation and conflicts was then shifted to the differences in cultures, since such differences are expected to exist. Controversial and assertive participants like Ma Nuo and Zhang Yali were replaced by similarly assertive foreign participants, setting up the confrontation between generally family-centered, moderate Chinese girls and assertive, self-determined foreign girls. Besides adding foreign girls as the female guests, the show also featured male figures from diverse cultures. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the success of the special editions from the U.K.,

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<sup>68</sup> See Chapter One on the history of “life-serving” shows in China.

Germany, Korea, and later France, Canada, and Italy was, on the one hand, based on a fulfillment of the imagination of mobility in space, and on the other hand, actually an opening up of controversial areas. Unconventionality was well-tolerated in these episodes, simply because unconventionality was expected. This tactic, which I refer to as exotic individuality, was also utilized in the game show “Fei Dei Will Watch” and the career show “*Tuoyingerchu*.”

The self-driven identity of the individual is an exotic aspiration embodied by the white male. In the words of the businessman and advertiser Tom Doctoroff,

Western individualism encourages each of us to define him- or herself independent of external expectations. We admire Bill Gates and Steve Jobs for the courage of their convictions even more than for their material success. In ambitious China, self-driven identity is an exotic, alluring aspiration...(27).

This exotic aspiration is admired, not only in the dating scenes but also in the career scenes. The first episode of the career show “*Tuoyingerchu*” featured a young French man competing with four Chinese men for job as a preschool teacher at an international kindergarten in Beijing. The young French man, who spoke fluent Chinese and was referred to by his Chinese name, Junxi (which translates as “handsome west”), and whose family background and motivation for becoming a kindergarten teacher in China was his opening introduction, was chosen as the most favored candidate for the job in the first round. A few tags were placed on Junxi during this opening round: (1) he came from a wealthy family who owned a house in central Paris; (2) he used an outdated 300 RMB Nokia phone because he understood what use the phone would be to him; and (3) he hoped to use his own Western methods to educate Chinese kids. Junxi explained that he gave up his wealthy life in Paris because he wanted to develop his own way of life and explore different possibilities in China. This motivation was applauded in the show. The exotic aspiration of the “handsome west,” who was portrayed as a self-driven individual, was contrasted with his Chinese competitor, Wang Minxian, who was motivated by the same reasons but was portrayed as a distrustful and even dangerous threat to the traditional image of a kindergarten teacher. Minxian’s previous experience of being a singer was judged as being unfit for the job by four mentors/experts in the show, despite his

statement on his motivation for applying his own method of educating children. Though Minxian explained that he was just a young man exploring life and that his past experiences were part of this exploration of life, he was ruled out in the first round of the competition. The exotic male figure of the self-driven individual, “handsome west” brought up the theme of self-determination in his choice of career, exiting the stage with dignity yet leaving his Chinese counterpart publicly rejected. This representation of the self-driven identity of the individual is necessarily an exotic one.

As white male participants are utilized both in the dating show and the career show, the roles of these exotic figures are normalized: they are expected to be independent, self-assured, and individualistic, and hence they are represented as being so only in the reality television episodes. These exotic figures became remote signifiers of something abstract and immaterializable. As one career mentor of “*Tuoyingerchu*” straightforwardly stated, “Yes, we see that he is brilliant, self-motivated, and I do appreciate his innovative style; but can he adapt to the everyday routine of the job? I have seen cases of foreigners failing miserably at everyday tasks before.” The discursively constructed ideal image of foreign contestants was broken immediately after the recognition that such an image was devoid of references to everyday life in urban China. This judgment predicted the failure of not only this foreign contestant, but also the limitations of the role which foreign participants can play in these reality television shows. Even in the dating scenes, white males failed to maintain their popularity. As pointed out by several female guests in the dating show “*Feicheng-Wurao*,” the foreign male guests came from afar and would probably leave eventually. A widely discussed episode featuring a Chinese female-American male couple who walked out of the studio of “*Feicheng-Wurao*” hand in hand ended in failure after the Chinese female lost her elusive white boyfriend. JSTV followed up on this case with a documentary, in which the woman told the audience with tears in her eyes, “He just won’t have dinner with my family. I have arranged everything, but he just disappeared, like evaporated.” Posed against the weddings of other successful matches from the show, this example shows that the white male broke the image of the family.

## Exotic Performance of Family Ethics

The use of exotic characters changed again in early 2013. As the shows exhausted the controversies of the exotic participants, and as these participants failed to supply imageries of a good urban life, a subtle change occurred in the dating show, which was still branded with “happiness/well-being” and “feelings/emotions.” The focus on foreign participants changed from their exotic backgrounds to their linkages to Chinese culture, specifically to family ethics. Foreigners remained exotic in their looks but their colloquialisms and statements about ethics were recognizably “Chinese.”

The slogan of a famous German participant in “*Feicheng-Wurao*,” uttered repeatedly in her fluent Chinese, was, “I want to have a Chinese mother-in-law.” Instead of announcing that she was interested in a Chinese partner, she focused on family relationships (particularly having a mother-in-law)<sup>69</sup> through marriage, showing her understanding and her respect that marrying a Chinese man would mean merging with the partner’s entire family. The discourse on family ethics that is often implied by Chinese participants was made explicit in the German participant’s statement. Another popular and widely discussed foreign participant was from Guinea Bissau, referred to as Xiao-de (a Chinese adaptation of her original name). Also equipped with very fluent Chinese and adapting the use of colloquial expressions, Xiao-de stated that she fancied a Chinese boyfriend and wanted to have eight children with him before she turned 30 years old. Xiao-de reverted from “mammonism” by inserting the ideal image of family life. She added, “Money and appearance are really not important. I just want to find someone I like who also likes me.” In another case of an Indian participant who was characterized by her beauty and referred to as the “Indian Goddess” of “*Feicheng-Wurao*,” her admiration of Chinese family ethics was made even more explicit. In her video statement, she said, “I am a mix – my mother is Indian and my father is Spanish. But I think I am more like a Chinese person. I do not like Indian men because they don’t respect women, and Spanish men are too open....So far I like China the most, and I will live in Guangzhou all my life.”

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<sup>69</sup> The relationship with a mother-in-law is portrayed as the thorniest relationship in a Chinese marriage. This has been featured in various soap operas, such as “*Shuang Mian Jiao*,” which was mentioned earlier in this chapter, and “A Tale of Two Cities” (双城生活, 2011) and its many remakes.

Despite the ambiguous reference to a culture that is only generally referred to as “Chinese,” she nonetheless made the discursive distinction between China, India, and Spain.

The online responses to these female guests were less divergent than those on the controversial cases mentioned before. Typical responses included, “Her Chinese is so good”; “She is much better than many Chinese – she can change to fit her Chinese partner’s life”; and “She is beautiful.” The receptions of these participants were also more uniform in forums and blogs: though the background and the motivation of these women was sometimes doubted,<sup>70</sup> the general reception of their upholding “Chinese” behaviors was recognized as fitting into the context of reality television shows.

In the examples above, something “Chinese” was pointed out by these participants without a clear reference of what that thing was. The Chineseness in their performance was assumed in their speech. In this reality television show where confrontations are expected, the more abstract their Chineseness, the easier it was for them to reconcile such Chineseness with their own equally vague foreign-ness. This foreign appreciation of the vaguely defined Chineseness in family ethics made them more attractive, and in turn, family ethics became more “modern” and “universal.”

### *3. Conclusion: The Split Discourses*

This dimension of discourse on urbanism has been exposed directly to the supervision of the mainstream media and the regulations of SARFT. Negotiations between the institutional interests of JSTV and the central authority have been centered on the discourse on the ethics of living an urban life, compared with the other two dimensions. The individual progressive path was promoted and then compromised in the dating show: the recognition of a self-driven individual fits into the imageries of an individual developmental path; however, once JSTV adjusted the program under pressure from the mainstream media and SARFT, representative figures of self-driven individuals were replaced

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<sup>70</sup> Bloggers have discussed the family background and economic conditions of Xiao-de, questioning whether her motivation to be on television was pure. However, the bloggers still agree with most online discussions that Xiao-de’s speeches and behavior on the show were desired.



by exotic or domestic figures. Family ethics, though undefined and vaguely referred to as “Chinese,” came to dominate the discursive field of the reality shows. Quiz shows, career shows, and game shows were produced to diversify the content of the dating show. Though the initial reception of the dating show had been divergent, a more uniform set of responses, usually in alliance with the mainstream criticisms of the reality television shows, appeared after the SARFT’s regulations and mainstream media’s formulations. The changes in strategies by JSTV were reactions to the pull of different forces; that is, the economic imperative of JSTV and the competition in the television industry, the political-cultural restrictions and political survival, and social conditions and concerns (on this particular dimension of discourse alone, the political-cultural restrictions are directly perceivable).

Because of their forced relationships, the reality television shows have created self-contradictory discourses. Moreover, the delivery of the discourses is not smooth or consistent. The reality television shows have changed their moral tone several times since 2010. There has been a split or, rather, a paradoxical representation of the developmental path in urban life: as illustrated in Chapter Two, the individual progressive path, however suppressed in the discursive field, still exists through the images supplied by the dating shows, career shows, quiz shows, and game shows. When images portray individual progression and desire, the discussions center on building harmonious families. As the host of the dating show, Meng Fei, once revealed, “Some male guests are smart – they don’t talk about their ambition and individual success, they just show a picture of their luxurious home and office. That is all they need to do.” As this ironic comment reveals, pragmatic conformity is required on a practical level, whereas individualistic expression is allowed on the “dream” (or the imaginary) level.

The split discourses reflect a deeper paradox of how to live an urban life in China. On the discursive level, the discourses are unified by the doctrines of “building a harmonious society” and restoring social order through family ethics; on the practical level, the competitive individual developmental path has slipped from the grip of mainstream media’s supervision and continues to guide people’s choices about how to live. JSTV’s reality television shows are an amalgamation of the products of contradicting forces, both aspiring to the unfamiliar condition of individuality and conforming to tradition-bound social stability and family

ethics. In the discourses on the ethics of urban living, JSTV's reality television shows have revealed the impossibility of congruity and coherency rooted deeply in the socio-cultural scene in contemporary China.

## Conclusion

### I.

In this thesis, I have analysed the dimensions of the discourse on urbanism as a way of life, hoping to expound the dynamics between the economic, political, and socio-cultural forces in the case of JSTV's golden hour reality television shows. As the analyses of this thesis imply, television, state supervision, economic incentives, and institutional interests are at the same time products of power and the mechanisms by which power can enact itself. The process is dialectical: regulatory imperatives of the central government are dissembled into the apparatuses of mainstream culture-making, which is increasingly led by reality television despite the obstinate conflicts and negotiations between the provincial broadcasters of reality television shows and SARFT. Reality television, at the same time evading and conforming to the *mainstream* cultural leadership of the central authority, has created fragmented and sometimes contradictory discourses. Through supervision and censorship, the *mainstream* cultural leadership of the government has gained legitimacy; in response, by challenging this leadership, JSTV's reality television shows have attained a legitimate status of being both original and new. Yet both of these motives were governed by their economic imperatives and their own institutional interests (of survival).

As said in Chapter 1, media can be thought of “as a ‘media *dispositif*’” which “makes visible its heterogeneity – the discursive, nondiscursive and modes of production and productivity.” (Coté 380) The thesis has provided empirical examples that show the validity of this adoption of the Foucaultian concept of *dispositif* through the unravelling of the visible, audible and interactive structures of the JSTV's reality television. The reality television shows can be viewed as a process of power en-action, which both creates and reflects the conditions of power relationships. That is, the reality television as *dispositif* that has integrated organs that coordinates and interact to weave system of discourses that reflect and formulate how urban life can be articulated, materialized and imagined. The system of discourses on urbanism, instead of been parcelled out straightforwardly in the discursive field, are dispersed into the mechanisms of making visible and

articulable the values, behaviours which are acted out by both the participants and the audiences of the reality televisions.

The images, the discursive fields, and the procedures of the games in the reality television shows and the regulations imposed on them are part of the mechanisms to dissemble a set of discourses into the colloquial, the practices of urban lives, and possibly the imaginations of urban lifestyles. The order of discourses that emerged out of this process is not commanded by any single force but by the dynamic interactions between all of them. Hence, the perspectives of viewing reality television as *dispositif* could go beyond the dualistic model of market versus government regulations. What needs to be recognized is that television does not produce the final product but, rather, provides platforms and materials for the *working through* of discourses (Ellis 55) in the course of production, reception, mobilization, and inter-textual reproduction.

The interactive and factually-based format of reality television, as illustrated in the thesis, is interwoven into the circulation and materialization of urban culture. As is often conveniently assumed, under the dynamic “media dispositif” of Chinese reality television, manifestations of force struggles would appear divergent and incoherent.

However, through the analyses of the heterogeneous organs in the *dispositif*, the thesis reveals a rather homogeneous set of discourses, which is only contradicting or incoherent on surface. That is to say, the distinct and heterogeneous features and settings of JSTV’s reality televisions have brought an actual coherency in the discourses produced, and the incoherencies are concentrated only on the dimension of discourse on morality. Two implications may be drawn from this. The first is related to possible limitations of this thesis. Divergences from the predominant and coherent set of discourses could have been channeled through other related cultural phenomena which have not been covered, partly due to the limited scope of this thesis. One possible example could be humorous responses and references to JSTV’s programs in other cultural products.

The second and more important implication is that it reveals the urgency of the question of why the apparent incoherencies have been conveniently co-opted into the coherency, particularly when the thesis has proven that incoherencies could actually elude the imposed media censorship from the central authority. The co-optation (or perhaps even self-censorship), hence, could be a

symptom of deeper on-going process of contemporary China. The significance of this thesis lies in that it makes conspicuous the happening of such process.

## II.

Emerging out of this dynamic process is the formulation of a way of life in the context of urban China – specifically, linear, individual progressivity. Reality television is said to be about “winning an ideology rather than a defining game characteristic because it seems natural and incontrovertible that the goal of any participant on these shows must be to win” (Kavka 115). Yet in the case of JSTV’s reality television shows, winning and losing seem to be levelled out in that the participants all share the same frame of urban lifestyle. What this paper calls attention to is whether the possibility of heterogeneity in the imaginary of urbanism exists, and thus the diverse realization of this heterogeneity, and whether its locus lies in alternatives and transgressions. This thesis found that the abundance of alternative voices on television, however, does not necessarily prove that a widely celebrated heterogeneity exists. The diverse performances of lifestyles and the controversies between mainstream culture and the reality television shows conform to the discourse on linear, individual progressivity in urban living. The three dimensions of this discourse have been elaborated in Chapters Two, Three, and Four.

In Chapter 2, I explained the reason why this discourse on linear individual progressivity is distinctively urban. I contrasted the dynamics of the space-time assemblage of the making of JSTV with the less dynamic case of the imaginaries of urban life in China. Contrary to the popular sentiment that reality television is a participative, diversity-promoting, and even “democratic” platform, the ostensible displays of grass-root voices and the strategic compromises on the official discourses are only superficial contradictions in the discourses. There is only one kind of imaginary of future life, only one way to live an urban life – by taking an individualistic, linear, and developmental path leading necessarily to a good life of family and career. It is the imagined renewed life in the future, with little references to present concerns. This dynamic process of urban renewal is filtered through the negotiations and confrontations of the conditions for dating, career-building, and home-making. By bringing this confrontation to light, JSTV’s reality shows successfully transformed the tension of urbanization into

individual struggles and achievements. The commonalities of urban planning by prefecture governments across different regions are played out as a single set of everyday-life-making, recognizable to the participants and the audiences only as individual lives with individual problems. Collective responses to social problems are personalized as an individual reaction in a single unit of urban life, such as unemployment, a delinquent youth living alone in a tiny flat in Nanjing, or discrimination against the rural population as having incomplete personalities and lack of skills or a new rural-to-urban immigrant in a low-income neighbourhood. The proximity of these everyday cases draws the audiences' attention while still keeping them distant from these problems.

In Chapter 3, I elaborated on another dimension of the discourse on urbanism, i.e., the discourse on knowledge, the dimension that strengthens linear progressivity. This dimension is important because it enacts linear progressivity and mobilizes participants by installing the hope that is dependent on the appeal of the promised consequences of a desired course of action. The two sub-categories of being book-smart and street-smart involve a course of action that leads to the promise of upward social mobility. The process of attaining this promised upward social mobility is reduced by the imitation and practice that stabilizes the state education system and the hierarchy defined by social elitism.

Further political consequences are incurred in the appeal of a promised land: by the desirable trait of being book-smart, most rural populations are deemed to be ineligible for the promised urban future. As studies have revealed, the most persisting inequality, the discrepancy in income between rural or rural-background immigrants and the urban population, is not at all mitigated by the state education system, which was devised to relinquish the cultural exclusion caused by ethnic or rural backgrounds.<sup>71</sup> Alternative lifestyles that are thus excluded by the discourse on knowledge become incoherent elements in these reality television shows. Hence, another category, the self-aware, is articulated to compromise with these threats. This chapter also implied that homogeneity is promoted to maintain the stability of the discourse of linear progressivity.

In Chapter 4, I explored the incoherencies in the discourse on the ethics of urban living, especially tracing the ruptures and discontinuities in the discourse

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<sup>71</sup> Gerard A. Postiglione, *Education and Social Change in China: Inequality in a Market Economy*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006.

of family ethics. I showed empirically that the incoherencies in this discourse are produced by the negotiations between the *mainstream* cultural leadership (represented by SARFT) and JSTV's self-positing. The reality television shows' novelty is compromised during the process, because of the challenges they pose to *mainstream* culture on family ethics. These discontinuities are seen in the various adjustment strategies implemented by JSTV to fit into *mainstream* culture, as illustrated in this chapter.

However, the discourse on ethics has never been coherently weaved into other discourses. The incongruities within this dimension are necessary reflections of the split role of media as government instrument and as profit-driven institutions. The competing economic incentives and the political survival has rendered the shifts and self-contradictions in the discourse on ethics of living. In this thesis, I have highlighted only two major contrasting values in ethics of living, that of self-driven individuality and that of family ethics. But this does not imply these two values are not the only two seen from the perspective of the reality television shows. I have used these two values to illustrate the interactions of the competing economic and political forces. I also captured the significant moments in the development of JSTV's reality television to reveal that the conflicts between these two sets of values dominate the negotiations, not the official voice and the grass-root voices but, rather, the voices for consistency ("harmony") and those for heterogeneity and alternatives. This conformity to consistency has decidedly affected the survival of JSTV.

### III.

The analyses of this thesis have hinted at the following: the mechanism of *dispositif* operates in response to the "urgent needs" of the time, as Foucault says. Neither defined by the central government nor by the industry, the "urgent needs" emerge out of the collective effects of dispersed forces. The media censorship has been overemphasized as the determinant force in creating the discourses – in fact, censorship has mostly taken effect on the dimension of discourse on family ethics, as explained in Chapter 4, only producing contradictions and incoherencies in the discourse on urbanism on the surface level. But on the more coherent dimension of discourse on space-time and knowledge, as explained in Chapter 2 and 3, JSTV's reality televisions have succeeded in

responding to an “urgent need” that sustained the stability of the discourse. But what “urgent needs” might mean and its consequences are ambiguous. Perhaps the next question is whether such “urgent need” actually exists in its singularity in the contemporary conditions of China.



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July 2014