

When the Chinese Dream Meets *Chinese Dream Show*: Reconstructing Dream Narratives in the Name of Public Interest Talent Shows

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Abstract

This paper primarily explores the manner in which China's reality talent shows have rearticulated dream narratives surrounding the Chinese Dream political discourse. This has occurred in response to common perceptions of such shows as vulgar or culturally inappropriate, which themselves were a consequence of the post-2005 boom in popularity of Super Girl Voice. My analysis is contextualised within the ideological connotations of the Chinese Dream, and falls into three main sections. The first section investigates the discursive strategy of the Chinese Dream, which can be said to integrate Confucianism and nationalism into the framework of a neoliberal market so as to emphasise the consistency between national and individual dreams, as well as the important and positive aspects of market values in the socialist agenda of public affairs. The second and third parts examine a public interest talent show called Chinese Dream Show. Through a discourse analysis of this talent show, I argue that the show is neoliberal theatre with Chinese characteristics, wherein a discursive formula I call 'public interest' employs two intertwined discursive systems – neoliberal rationality and sentimentality – to narrate dream-realising stories that satisfy the needs of both political correctness and market interests.

Keywords: talent shows, television entertainment, Chinese Dream, *Chinese Dream Show*

In 2005, *Super Girl Voice* (*Chaoji nüsheng* 超级女声), a talent show featuring only singing that was largely modelled and based on the format of *American Idol*, achieved unprecedented popularity for a television show across the People's Republic of China (PRC). The phenomenal success of *Super Girl Voice*, produced and aired on Hunan Satellite TV 湖南卫视, sparked an intellectual public debate surrounding its aesthetic taste, as some critics accused the genre of exacerbating cultural vulgarity and producing an excessive number of television entertainment programmes owing to the nature of marketised media (Huang, 2011). The term 'vulgarity' (*disu* 低俗) is used herein not as an absolute but as a relative aesthetic evaluation, used to reference the idea that the cultural taste of talent shows has become out of control and far from the designs of the party-state and its values. However, by no means have these controversies impeded the proliferation of the genre over the past decade or so, during which time hundreds of talent shows have flooded Chinese television and video websites. In particular, since 2010, a constellation of new high-profile talent shows, such as *The Voice of China* (*Zhongguo haoshengyin* 中国好声音), *Chinese Dream Show* (*Zhongguo mengxiang xiu* 中国梦想秀) and *China's Got Talent* (*Zhongguo daren xiu* 中国达人秀), have appeared on air, thereby marking another popular wave of this Western-inspired genre in China. Despite the fact that some of these talent shows are largely based on overseas franchises, they have been localised in order to survive and grow in the cultural-political atmosphere of contemporary China.

During this process, the PRC's State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT)¹ issued a series of directives. Two of these, launched respectively in 2011 and 2013 (SAPPRFT, 2013; Xinhua News Agency, 2011), have become widely known as the "curb the entertainment rules" (*xianyu ling* 限娱令) (Bai, 2014: 79). Rather than simply banning the genre, the regulator has interfered in the production and dissemination of talent shows by adopting various measures, such as prohibiting popular voting via short text messages, restricting broadcasting timeslots, allocating production quotas to television stations, and preventing the homogenisation of television entertainment. Thus, the talent show genre has been heavily stamped with Chinese characteristics, so that it caters to the dual needs of the ideological state apparatus and the coexisting highly competitive media market.

Such changes to China's talent shows clearly embody the objectives of SARFT's regulation and censorship, conceived as a process of governing culture. However, they can also be seen as an embodiment of the reestablishment of the party-state cultural hegemony by governing society through culture. In broader terms, the process should be regarded as part of the Clean Up the Screen (*Jinghua yingping* 净化荧屏) campaign, which Bai Ruoyun defines as "an ensemble of state policies, regulations and actions aimed at reining in the spectacular rise of entertainment television since the late 1990s" (Bai, 2014: 69). This is a process of encouraging various forms of expression that constitute and legitimate sovereignty activities, as well as limiting or excluding representations against sovereignty, which Michael Shapiro calls "cultural governance" (2004: 4-6). While scholarship has predominantly concentrated on the evolution of cultural governance through television drama series and the increasingly prosperous online video industry (Li, 2015; Schneider, 2012), these pioneering studies have critically overlooked television and online entertainment programmes. Therefore, my research on the discursive transformation of talent shows — the most widely-watched and popular television entertainment genre in the past two decades — is able to provide an updated account of the party-state's cultural governance on a discursive level.

This article discusses how the political discourse of the Chinese Dream permeates the dream narratives of talent shows by examining a high-profile reality talent show *Chinese Dream Show*. Whether in Anglo-American or Chinese talent shows, dream narratives saturate the subgenre of reality TV (Yang, 2013: 518). Laurie Ouellette suggests that popular reality TV may be better adapted to the governmental process of neoliberalism, which emphasises the indirect and diffuse interference in culture (Ouellette, 2007: 324). As a technology of governing, reality TV adopts a strategy of governance at a distance to promote an ethical awareness of self-reflection, control and transformation in an individual, all of which are features that constitute a good citizen. Presenting reality TV as a quintessential cultural technology for reinventing individuals and populations as entrepreneurial citizens, Ouellette and Hay note that Anglo-American reality TV rationalises neoliberal logic so that it becomes a "resource for inventing, managing, caring for, and protecting ourselves as citizens" (Ouellette & Hay, 2008: 4). Similarly, China's reality talent shows have promoted a neoliberal rationality of self-empowerment through self-governance and the active and responsible self, as Chinese liberals have celebrated the cultural pluralism of *Super Girl Voice* bursting from the Western-inspired genre (Huang, 2011). While the Super Girl's dreams as evoked by the logic of market competition were interpreted as excessively selfish and egocentric, the party-state was

¹ In 2013, SARFT was merged with the General Administration of Press and Publication to form the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). After the institutional reform of the State Council in March 2018, the SAPPRFT was replaced by a new ministry-level agency — the National Radio and Television Administration.

unwilling to permit the diffusion of various media representations alongside social chaos during the post-reform period. The party-state has thus exhibited wariness of the original cultural orientations of talent shows that are deeply marked by neoliberal logics. Some scholars have argued that the ubiquitous dream narratives in China's talent shows have changed as a direct result of party-state regulation and censorship. In her study of *China's Got Talent*, a show that aired on Shanghai Dragon TV 上海东方卫视, Yang Ling thinks that this show "incorporates a more disciplinary version of dream discourse by explicitly and implicitly instructing the audience on how to cope with social reality, what to dream and what not to dream, and how to seek personal identity and happiness" (Yang, 2013: 518). As China's talent shows have increasingly become the most compelling media representations of the Chinese Dream (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦), an official slogan commonly used since 2012, how individual dreams are aligned with national dream narratives remains unclear, as does the question of what specific discursive formulas articulating dream narratives have appeared in such talent shows.

Therefore, this article is aimed at filling a significant gap in the current literature by examining how China's talent shows have developed new discursive formulas to reconstruct dream narratives surrounding the Chinese Dream ideal in a party-ordained way while maintaining the appeal of the genre. My analysis begins by explaining the ideological connotations and implications of the Chinese Dream. The language surrounding the Chinese dream as political discourse in today's China is intended to consolidate the party-state regime by incorporating Confucianism and nationalism into the framework of China's socialist market economy under the aegis of supplementing supposedly foreign culture with Chinese characteristics. Along with emphasising consistency between national and individual dreams, the Chinese Dream is also a discursive strategy to integrate neoliberal market values into the socialist agenda of public development. The paper will then go on to combine my long-term empirical observation and data collection with a discourse analysis of *Chinese Dream Show*, a public interest talent show (*gongyi xuanxiu jiemu* 公益选秀节目) that helps ordinary people realise their dreams. After defining *Chinese Dream Show* as a form of neoliberal theatre, the third section presents a case study exploring the story of Yang Pei 杨佩, an armless participant on the show who wanted to realise her dream of selling her own embroidery works. The example demonstrates how this public interest talent show produces an appealing entertainment discourse that successfully reconstructs positive images both of individuals and the market under the state-dominated neoliberal framework. My analysis not only finds the discursive formula that I call 'public interest' (*gongyi* 公益) to be present in this show, but also argues that this formula employs a discursive combination of neoliberal rationality and sentimentality to balance the dual needs of the party-state ideological apparatus and television entertainment market.

1. Locating the Chinese Dream between Confucianism, Nationalism and Neoliberalism

As the popular trend of dream narratives in China's talent shows is contextualised in the Chinese Dream, it is necessary to make a detour through the ideological implications of this political slogan. The Chinese Dream slogan has been among the most widely used items of political vocabulary across the term of President Xi Jinping's leadership (2012–present). Xi defined Chinese Dream as realising the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴) and further crystallised the Chinese Dream in the Two Centennial Goals (*liangge yibainian fendou mubiao* 两个一百年奋斗目标) (Xi, 2014a: 35-37).

The first centennial goal is to ‘build a well-off society in an all-round way’ (*quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui* 全面建成小康社会) by 2021, when the Communist Party of China (CPC) celebrated its centenary. As a concept rooted in Confucianism and socialist ideology, *xiaokang* roughly means ‘moderate prosperity’, outlining a social vision for the overall living standards of all Chinese people that entails totally wiping out poverty. The second centennial goal is to transform China into a prosperous, democratic, civilised, harmonious, and modern socialist country by 2049 – the founding centenary of the PRC.

Applying Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, the Chinese Dream is a “nodal point” in the political discourse of today’s China (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 112). The Chinese Dream has become a privileged signifier around which the party-state orders other signifiers. Other concepts, such as the state, the market and individuals, acquire their meanings from discursive relationships to the Chinese Dream as a political ideal. The Chinese Dream is an ideological product of maintaining the one-party political system while also developing a market economy, as well as a political slogan that applies the discursive strategy of “Confucian nationalism”, a hybridised ideology formed by reconciling (Western) nationalism and (Chinese) Confucianism (Bell, 2014). It redefines what it means to have harmony between the state and individuals, placing emphasis on the party-state’s legitimacy. Simultaneously, neoliberal practices now constitute many aspects of socio-cultural life – though, this only occurs in a state-controlled developmental way. Indeed, the power-related processes of discursive inclusions and exclusions surrounding the Chinese Dream notion need to be further addressed.

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

Moreover, the party-state has revived Confucianism in China over the past two decades, specifically incarnated in the socialist moral order of Hu Jintao’s Harmonious Society (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) and Xi’s Chinese Dream. In Mao’s era, the CPC fiercely criticised Confucianism; Mao himself advocated for the destruction of tradition to consolidate the regime of new China by launching a series of political campaigns and class struggles (Gregor & Chang, 1979). However, the Chinese Dream notion has specifically employed Confucianism to stabilise the established party-state political system during the process of national marketisation. China’s rapid economic growth in the past four decades has resulted in increasingly serious problems of social polarisation and class consolidation. Since 2012, China has entered a new phase of economic development, one which President Xi has called the “New Normal” (*xin changtai* 新常态) (Xinhua, 2014). As the slowdown of economic growth has, to some degree, challenged the CPC’s legitimacy, the party-state has actively

integrated Confucian ideology and its claim to create a harmonious symbiotic relationship between the state and its constituents into a series of political discourses by establishing an appealing vision of the future. As such, the Chinese Dream contends that the realisation of individual dreams is closely bound to the nation's social and economic development. This doctrine also claims that without the revival of the Chinese people as a whole, it is hard for individuals to realise their dreams. Through official propaganda and media outlets at all levels, the party-state has further been "pushing a range of consensus-building activities under the umbrella of the Chinese Dream discourse" (Gow, 2017: 2). As the most prominent part of the grand narrative, the Core Socialist Values (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan* 社会主义核心价值观) crystallise the vision of the Chinese Dream at national, societal, and citizenship levels. Analysing from a Gramscian perspective, Gow argues that the campaign indicates a change in concentration from the economic basis to the superstructure in Xi's leadership through increasing intervention in civil society so as to reassert the primacy of cultural power (Gow, 2017: 6). The concept of 'a good person' in Chinese pertains to those who pursue their own personal successes within the established political-economic framework, whom the party-state considers obedient citizens (*shunmin* 顺民). Therefore, creating modern Chinese citizens who are able and willing to comply with the party-ordained core values is the objective of a variety of Confucian consensus-building efforts centred on the Chinese Dream.

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

In addition, although the Chinese Dream places an explicit emphasis on the central role of the state, it is not a total denial of the market economy within the established framework of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Returning to Laclau and Mouffe's theory, the market is an "element" that requires multiple ways of understanding (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 105). Through its relation to the Chinese Dream as the nodal point, the market "element" becomes a "moment" within the party-state's political framework in the name of a socialist market economy. At the Forum on Literature and Art in October 2014, President Xi encouraged China's writers and artists to play an irreplaceable role in realising the Chinese Dream and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, as well as the Two Centennial Goals. He thinks that "artists should not lose themselves in the tide of a market economy nor go astray while answering the question of whom to serve", and their works "should not be the slaves of the market and should not bear the stench of money" (Xi, 2014b). As he notes, the market should not play a dominating role in the process of realising the Chinese Dream and constructing its representations. Xi's words do not exclude the market and its related concepts from the Chinese

Dream. Instead, the Dream discourse incorporates other possible meanings of the market, as long as the market with Chinese characteristics does not override the party-state.

Indeed, the socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics has created and accentuated divisions in society based on class, region and ethnic group, while the official articulatory practice in the discursive structuring of the Chinese Dream still adopts aspects of neoliberalism. In fact, neoliberalism can be defined as an ideology that places a strong focus on the benefits of liberating “individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2005: 2). The party has not always encouraged the promotion of the term ‘neoliberalism’ in China, and even opposed it (Shambaugh, 2016: 107). Meanwhile, the question of whether or not post-reform China can be said to be neoliberal remains controversial. Donald Nonini (2008) opposes the usage of the term neoliberalism in relation to today’s China since the authorities, like the majority of the general public, are suspicious of the market. Through a keyword approach, Andrew Kipnis (2007) claims that the discourse of *suzhi* (素质), a term which literally means human quality, plays a significant role via its applications in population management and especially educational reforms. This happens by reifying social hierarchical differences, which rarely exist in discourses of neoliberalism (Kipnis, 2007: 390).

Nevertheless, it is an undeniable fact that the socialist market economy under the one-party system has brought about a variety of market-oriented restructuring initiatives, such as the reform of state-owned companies, economic deregulation, administrative decentralisation and deeper internationalisation since the early 1990s. As David Harvey notes, China is a “construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control”, which he calls “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” (Harvey, 2005: 120). The nodal point of the Chinese Dream is therefore articulated by the party-state beyond the antagonistic relationship between the state and the market. This is the alleged “third way”, in which the party-state has successfully incorporated market values, or some neoliberal elements, into the socialist framework, thereby instituting a kind of state-controlled marketisation (Li, 2013: 912-913; Zhu, 2008: 126). The market is articulated through its relationships with two dimensions of the Chinese Dream: the individuals and the whole, or the private and the public. Ideologically speaking, the party claims the market should be subject to the common will of the party-state, the nation and the collective in the discursive imagination of the Chinese Dream. Meanwhile, the market is expected by the party to serve social responsibility and the public interest, such that it can act as an effective development tool for maintaining the consistency between national and individual goals.

Interestingly, the neoliberal doctrine of self-reliance is largely compatible with socialist morality. While socialist self-reliance (*zili gengsheng* 自力更生) implies relying on each individual’s strengths rather than foreign assistance to achieve state improvement, neoliberal self-reliance stresses the embodiment of individual entrepreneurialism within the logic of market competition (Li, 2013: 912). Since the 1980s, the party-state has ceased its excessive interventions in the autonomy of individuals that had once characterised the era of the planned economy. The Confucianism that Hu’s Harmonious Society promoted shows “little faith in political and economic self-reliance and self-regulation of individual and communities” (Zhu, 2008: 132). This means that the Harmonious Society underlined an inseparable connection between individual improvement and overall national advancement by avoiding self-reliance. By contrast, the Chinese Dream has clearly blurred the lines between these two forms of self-reliance discourse by stripping out elements that go against the grain of the state-dominated

market economy. The prerequisite is that the ideals of self-reliance and self-improvement are subordinate to the ‘overall situation’ (*daju* 大局) — an official term the party-state uses to describe the national interest that cannot be undermined or resisted.

2. Public Interest Talent Shows: A Neoliberal Theatre with Chinese Characteristics

The Chinese Dream and its ideological principles have expanded from their operation as political mottos into television entertainment discourse. The ideological hybrid embedded in the Chinese Dream calls for the reconfiguration of the relationship between the state, the market and individuals. With the launch of the SARFT documents, as represented by the “curb the entertainment rules” in 2011 and 2013, China’s talent shows followed the global popularity of a set of Euro-American franchises to embrace the second popular wave of the genre after the unprecedented success of *Super Girl Voice* in China. Their Chinese versions have incorporated many neoliberal elements embedded in franchises such as *the Idols*, *the Got Talent*, *the Voice* and others into the intersection between the Confucian revival, the ideological hegemony of nationalism, and the unique Chinese practice of the state-controlled market economy. Resonating against these explicitly political signals, the dreams of contestants appearing in the talent shows reflect neither the cruel aspects of neoliberalism as embodied in the law of the jungle ethos under which the weak serve as prey to the strong, nor the conventional Chinese grand narrative of collectivism and nationalism. Rather, China’s talent shows ultimately exhibit the dissolution of contradictions between national and individual interests. Meanwhile, these Western-inspired talent shows represent the establishment of the market’s positive role in China’s national and social development. In this sense, such a talent show representation of neoliberalism can be considered to be a forging process for a neoliberal “theatre” with Chinese characteristics (Couldry, 2008).

Zhejiang Satellite TV (ZJSTV 浙江卫视) has played an important role in promoting the new wave of talent shows in line with the Chinese Dream. The outlet is a flagship provincial satellite channel affiliated with Zhejiang Radio and TV Group, a media conglomerate owned by the Zhejiang provincial government. Because the party-state threw state-owned television stations to the mercies of the market through the cancellation of their official subsidies in the 1980s, ZJSTV is not only a party-state mouthpiece but also a state-owned commercialised media organisation. Indeed, the party-state has never loosened its ideological control over media discourse – even with respect to self-financing broadcasters – and it ensures no broadcaster deviates from the official doctrine. In terms of administrative structure, ZJSTV must accept administration and supervision from the Administrations of Radio and Television at both the national and provincial levels. Despite such control at the hands of a watchful government, the commercialisation of the television industry and commodification of television programmes have propelled ZJSTV to produce and broadcast more market-oriented programmes to boost audience ratings and attract advertisers, because it must still stay independently fiscally solvent. Over twenty years of commercial operation and nationwide broadcast via satellites, ZJSTV has become one of the main players in China’s television entertainment. Based on its brand positioning strategies of China Blue (*Zhongguo lan* 中国蓝) and as “the first dream channel”, ZJSTV can provide a good case for comprehending the representative formulas of dream narratives in China’s talent shows.

While the party-state has forced the revision, shrinking, suspension, and cancellation of many entertainment programmes since the launch of the “curb the entertainment rules” in 2011, SARFT regulators have repeatedly praised ZJSTV and its talent shows. Gao Changli 高长力, then Deputy Director of the Division of Propaganda Management of SARFT, contended that

ZJSTV's high-profile talent shows as represented by *Chinese Dream Show*, can be compatible with the Chinese aesthetic habits and political-cultural landscape (Nanfang Metropolis Daily, 2012). Xia Chen'an 夏陈安, then Director of ZJSTV, responded, "No PK, no votes, no champions, no star-formation plan, and no continuous broadcasts. We take the initiative to dance with shackles. This programme comes up to positive energy and down to earth. It is satisfactory from top to bottom" (没有 PK, 没有选票, 没有冠军, 没有造星计划, 没有连续的播出。我们是主动戴上镣铐, 跳出一个舞蹈。这个节目上接正气, 下接地气, 上下都满意; Chen, 2011).² This "satisfaction from top to bottom" hinges on the political-economic success of dream narratives contained in such talent shows.

Chinese Dream Show is a self-declared public interest television entertainment programme (*gongyi dianshi yule jiemu* 公益电视娱乐节目) meant to help participants realise their dreams (Jiang, 2014).³ Although it is not the first public interest television entertainment programme in China, it indeed started the popularity of the genre from the mid-2010s. The popular wave of China's public interest television entertainment was highly related to the launch of the two curb entertainment rules in 2011 and 2013. Hence, market-oriented television entertainments, and especially talent shows which had been regarded as vulgar culture in the era of *Super Girl Voice*, were forced to explore a series of new discursive formulas. This discursive experimentation not only enabled officials to stop worrying about the vulgar tastes that Western-imported talent show franchises brought, but produced a model that could also achieve the same commercial success as those vulgar talent shows. While the talent show genre has evolved to represent political correctness, providing a narrative for how someone's dream acts in accordance with the Chinese Dream ideal and the norms set and enforced by the party-state, some of them also strive to cultivate socialist cultural taste with Chinese characteristics by flaunting the pursuit of public interest through dream narratives. During the promotion of *Chinese Dream Show*, ZJSTV desperately attempted to draw a clear line between this public interest television entertainment and the talent show genre, since the latter has been stigmatised since the popularity of *Super Girl Voice* (Sohu, 2014). However, many Chinese video-sharing websites, search engines and scholars still categorise it as a talent show. This is in large part because the show consists almost entirely of talent show elements, including amateur performance, talent competition and audience voting. The categorisation implies the "disingenuous" application of neoliberal logic, through which ZJSTV employs the concept of public interest to cover up the essence of a talent show (Yu, 2011).

In fact, this paper adopts 'public interest' rather than 'public service' as the translation in English of the Chinese term *gongyi* to describe the genre to which *Chinese Dream Show* belongs precisely so as to reflect the disingenuous neoliberal logic. Through deciphering the connotations of these two frequently-used translations, we are further able to understand the concept of 'public interest', which *Chinese Dream Show* declares as to be a characteristic of its programme, as well as its difference from the connotations that the term 'public service' denotes in the Chinese context. In China, public interest television entertainment programmes

² Player Kill, abbreviated as PK, is a talent-show knockout mode that *Super Girl Voice* was inspired by an online game and then created.

³ The first eight seasons (2011-2014) were broadcast as 90-minute weekly programmes aired in a Saturday evening prime time slot. From February 2015 to May 2016, the ninth season became a 25-minute daily programme aired during prime time from Sunday to Thursday evenings. Beginning in February 2018, the tenth and latest season has reverted to a weekly programme broadcast on Sunday evenings. Despite being off the air from the end of the tenth season to the time of writing, ZJSTV has not officially announced that it will permanently give up the franchise.

are not the first genre to place stress on the attribute of *gongyi*. Before that, the most widely known and recognised *gongyi* television genre in China was *gongyi guanggao* (公益广告), which is freely translated (or paraphrased) as ‘public service advertisement’ (PSA) in English-language academia (Landsberger, 2009; Puppín, 2018). That most scholars publishing in English are accustomed to translating *gongyi guanggao* as PSA might imply the salience of a comparative or historical research perspective. In fact, *gongyi guanggao* should not be confused with American-style PSAs or the Japanese *kōkyō kōkoku* (公共広告) as the Chinese counterpart is a form of social advertising that is connected to but still separate from political and commercial advertising (Landsberger, 2009: 335). In contrast, the most essential difference between *gongyi guanggao* and public interest television entertainment in China is that the former are advertisements aired in time slots that state-owned commercialised media freely provide to promote social values, while the latter is a profit-oriented television genre featuring a large number of TV commercials and advertising placements. Therefore, this paper translates *gongyi* as ‘public interest’ to better highlight that *Chinese Dream Show* is a profitable television entertainment show that benefits different contestants in a neoliberal way, a fact concealed under the name of public interest. Meanwhile, such a translation can also avoid confusion with the conception of public service broadcasting — a broadcasting system designed for providing information and entertainment to the general public that does not seek to make a profit.

Chinese public interest television entertainment is similar to what Ouellette and Hay call “charity TV” in their study of American reality TV (Ouellette & Hay, 2008: 32-62). Charity TV programmes, such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* and *Miracle Workers*, adhere to neoliberal and commercial logics while still intervening in issues of public welfare by helping needy individuals and families. The rise of these types of shows can be contextualised within an environment marked by further privatisation of public services during George W. Bush’s presidency (Ouellette & Hay, 2008: 37-39). By contrast, *Chinese Dream Show* set a significant precedent for the wave of public interest television entertainment that adopt a neoliberal tone with Chinese characteristics. Such talent shows outwardly proclaim their pursuit of public interest mirroring official concern about the social responsibilities of state-run broadcasters, who have a mandate from the party-state to shun vulgar culture. While the discursive formula articulates that realisations of various personal dreams can be endowed with public interest, SARFT regulators are happiest with the dream narratives that exist within the official framework of the Chinese Dream. Meanwhile, at least from the angle of the producers themselves, it is important that the pursuit of political correctness does not come at the expense of entertainment value.

In the beginning, ZJSTV purchased BBC’s *Tonight’s the Night* (2009–2011) franchise as a format for production of the initial two seasons. In the original format for these early shows, the production mainly focused on the artistic dreams of ordinary people, featuring them living out their fantasies for real. Since its third season in 2012, *Chinese Dream Show* has transformed into a public interest talent show, having abandoned the BBC’s original format and gradually transformed into a neoliberal theatre with Chinese characteristics. The brand-new programming format created by ZJSTV’s own team extends the range of dreams beyond people who have artistic aspirations, including cases such as that of an unknown actor who dreams of acting as a soldier, a post-80s youth dreaming of building a medical room for the retirement home that he operates, a group of workmates dreaming of acquiring sound equipment for their community centre, and so on. From the third to the ninth seasons, Chinese stand-up comedian Zhou Libo 周立波 featured as the recurring dream-ambassador (*mengxiang dashi* 梦想大使)

in charge of interviewing dream-seekers (*zhuimeng ren* 追梦人) and other guests, thereby playing a key role in driving the plot of the show and creating an engaging narrative.

The narrative modes of the dream-seeker segments vary slightly with regard to their details, but the general process is clear. A dream-seeker first makes a presentation about her or his dream. This can take various forms, including as performing, speaking, playing a short clip, and so on. Zhou then interviews the dream-seeker by asking some questions about the reasons behind their dream, its details and relevant facts. He then negotiates with a group of dream-helpers (*mengxiang zhulituan* 梦想助力团) made up of sponsor representatives, celebrities and media journalists to design a potential assistance package. Typically, media journalists like to provide dream-seekers with social resources through their social networks, while sponsors and celebrities always promise direct financial support. Ultimately, three hundred live audience members act as the dream-jury (*mengxiang guanchatuan* 梦想观察团), who vote on whether to support the dream-fulfilment package. The final episode of every season involves a dream ceremony (*mengxiang shengdian* 梦想盛典), in which the show awards several prizes to selected participants from the season and a grand prize for the most popular dream-seeker.

The substantive transformation of the programming orientation toward public interest extends the scope of that dreams that can be realised via *Chinese Dream Show*. This does not mean that any dream at all can be featured on the show. To recruit appropriate dream-seekers, ZJSTV has established a specific division called the Dream-fulfilment Office (*Yuanmeng ban* 圆梦办) and allows applications to be submitted in-person, online and by telephone (Jiang, 2014: 19). For example, the third season launched a large-scale recruitment drive that ZJSTV dubbed the “Hundred-City Dreamer Drive” (*Bai cheng xunmeng daxingdong* 百城寻梦大行动) in March 2012. This three-month-long initiative hunted for dream-seekers appropriate for the new format. As part of this, ZJSTV organised two thousand events in more than three hundred shopping malls and nearly one hundred campuses throughout the country. In addition to sending crews to collect potential dream-seekers and their stories, the programme accepts application materials via email.⁴ The application materials should include an application form with the basic personal information of the dream-seeker and his or her dream-agent, a life photo, and two videos including a performance showing a talent and a self-introduction by the dream-seeker. The application form has two key questions: (1) In your opinion, how can we help you as a dream-seeker to fulfil your dream? and (2) please narrate your life experience and story as a dream-seeker. The application information giving the dream, life experience and story of the dream-seeker are the most important elements in considering an applicant’s suitability for *Chinese Dream Show*. The application also declares that the show does not undertake the following functions: “supervision of public opinion, judicial justice, seeking medical advice, poverty alleviation, academic discussion, raising investment, business promotion”.⁵ Excluding some kinds of dreams demonstrates the limits of the public interest for the show.

⁴ See the online application webpage for the ninth season:
<https://web.archive.org/web/20160521153445/http://www.zjstv.com/news/zjnews/201503/323872.html>

⁵ See the application form of the ninth season of *Chinese Dream Show*:
https://web.archive.org/web/20160816002205/http://www.zjstv.com/liv_loadfile/news/zjnews/fold70/1426053185_62163200.doc

3. Chinese Dream Show: Reconstructing Dream Narratives in the Disguise of Public Interest

A method by which dreams supported by public interest can be narrated in an officially accredited and appealing way has been problematic for ZJSTV's producers. The most important consideration is that the dream narratives cannot challenge the legitimacy of the party-state system, but rather they must highlight the concept of social positive power. *Chinese Dream Show* has a prominent discursive formula that shapes the stories of dream-seekers in the name of the public interest with a combination of neoliberal rationality and sentimentality. The dream narratives might dig into their virtue of self-reliance by shifting the attitudes of the dream-seekers toward their predicaments, thereby transforming them into a series of self-enterprising and inspiring stories. Meanwhile, the show's concern with ratings manifests as a demand for emotional stories that attract viewers. Thus, vulnerable groups, such as disabled persons, migrant workers and low-income earners, have become the most common dream-seekers in the show. In her wide-ranging analysis of disability in contemporary China, Dauncey establishes a new theoretical framework called "para-citizenship" to explain how people with disabilities are discursively constructed in China (Dauncey, 2020: 3). In fact, this framework of para-citizenship has the potential to be applied to understand the cultural, ideological, and historical construction of not only disabled people but also other vulnerable or non-normative social groups as para-citizens in Chinese society. Hence, we are able to regard *Chinese Dream Show* as a neoliberal theatre where citizenship and para-citizenship performances are staged. While their stories might be articulated around the gap between their harsh realities and the inspiring dreams they choose to convey, the show neoliberalises the theatre of promoting public interest by providing financial support or social resources to successful dream-seekers. The particular case of Yang Pei, a disabled young lady, accurately captures this blend of neoliberal rationality and sentimentality.

Yang Pei, a 24-year-old girl from northwest China's Shaanxi Province, appeared on the fifth season of the show, first broadcast on 3 May 2013.⁶ As she is introduced, it becomes apparent that she is a young double-arm amputee. After her self-introduction, the presenter Zhu Yali expresses a warm welcome and asks, "What is your dream?" Yang firmly answers, "My dream is to open up a small cross-stitch embroidery shop." Zhu repeats her dream with a puzzled expression and confirms: "Cross-stitch embroidery? Are you going to sell other people's works or your own works?" The girl confidently answers: "Other people will buy my own works." The programme then cuts to Zhou Libo and the live audience who warmly applaud her for this unexpected dream. Zhu carefully asks her what happened to her arms. Yang answers, "At the age of nine, when I was on my way to see my mum, I accidentally pulled an electrical wire. I didn't know that it was loose. Then, the electricity went through my body. I felt that my heart was burning. I lost consciousness. When I woke up, all I knew was that I was lying on the ground. My mum was hugging me ... and kept crying."

After Zhu Yali praises Yang's beautiful smile – perhaps to ease the tragic atmosphere that has enveloped the scene – the programme cuts to a short video clip titled "Yang Pei: A Person's Life in Shanghai". The video shows her determination and her ability to look after herself on a daily basis, including washing her clothes, buying vegetables and cooking, and how she has set up an embroidery stall to earn a living in the metropolis. The show proceeds to the "Dreams May Come True" (*mengxiang zhaojin xianshi* 梦想照进现实) phase. Zhou

⁶ See the video of Yang Pei's audition in *Chinese Dream Show*:
<https://archive.org/details/Httpswww.youtube.comwatchv4jRsGZ4V6Vo>

Libo has a more in-depth conversation with Yang about the feasibility of her dream and some personal stories. Zhou first asks: “Why do you want to set up a cross-stitch embroidery shop?” Yang replies: “Because embroidery ... hmm ... I can just spend a few *yuan* on material and do it myself. And I can sew it and sell it. I brought some of my works.” After Zhou displays her works one by one to the live audience, Yang uses her right foot to pick up an incomplete work. Zhou invited her to show her skill onscreen. In the following three minutes, with the melody of the popular song *The Girl Swinging Her Wings* (*Huizhe chibang de nühai* 挥着翅膀的女孩), a set of close-ups shows every detail of Yang’s process, from threading a needle to using her feet to masterfully embroider. During the process, Zhou says, “That is why a human being is called the lord of creation. No difficulties can really stop [human beings].”

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

Subsequently, Zhou invites two entertainment celebrities in the group of dream-helpers to give Yang some encouragement. Then, Zhou announces that he is willing to pay ten thousand *yuan* for all six of her works shown on the scene earlier. He politely asks whether ten thousand *yuan* is enough. The girl says: “To me it is already a sky-high price!” Before the vote, Zhou as the dream ambassador negotiates with the dream-helpers to put forward their assistance plan for Yang Pei. Zhejiang TV shopping company Best1 好易购电视购物 proposes to financially support her dream. The Golden Coast Performance Arts Group 金海岸演艺集团 promises to offer technological support for her online shop, while two other sponsors also pledge support. Yang eventually receives 288 votes from the dream-jury. This result allows her to receive the listed support and fulfil her dream to open a small cross-stitch embroidery shop, a chance she owes entirely to the dream-helpers of the show. At that moment, a pair of huge wings right above her swing up to the sound of the upbeat melody of *Flying Higher* (*Feide genggao* 飞得更高). The live audience, cheering, rise in a standing ovation when Yang and her family hug each other to celebrate her dream come true.

This is a representative example of the dream narrative created around the neoliberal doctrine. It contains two aspects: neoliberal rationality and sentimentality. The first half of Yang’s section pertains to the feasibility of her dream — namely, that it does not seem to be a feasible dream for a double-arm amputee to open a shop and sell her own cross-stitched embroidery. Even for an ill-trained able-bodied person, embroidery is difficult. Initially, this fact makes her dream seem unreasonable and even unbelievable. She proves its feasibility by demonstrating her ability for self-care and independent daily living, but she also demonstrates a live presentation of her embroidery skills. In the shots, Yang’s shining smile reflects her

optimism and enterprising personality. Such evidence articulated around neoliberal rationality makes her dream reachable. In other words, if she did not have sufficient skills and the ability to stitch her embroidery, there would be no point in her receiving any help toward realising her dreams. The dream narrative appeals to neoliberal rationality by gazing upon the self-reliance of the dream-seeker, as well as satisfying the audience's curiosity. Some vehicles for conveying this include when Yang's remarkable embroidery skills inspire Zhou to praise the value and agency of human beings as "the lords of creation", when the melody of *The Girl Swinging Her Wings* resounds, or when close-up shots show the details of how she uses her feet to sew on par with a person using their hands.

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

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

issues, including religion, ethnic minority rights, LGBT rights and so on. Yet such entertainment always avoids dealing with these sensitive topics, portraying them as irrelevant to the dream-fulfilment of ordinary people, limiting what is depicted on the show to the official framework of the Chinese Dream. As such, what this show produces as representations of Chinese citizenship and para-citizenship are the results of discursive struggles and negotiations between the state, the market and individuals.

Furthermore, the show often places great emphasis on the comparatively positive role of the market rather than the government regarding achieving dreams. In the case of *Super Girl Voice*, Xiao Hui argues that an emotional performance can contribute to the socioeconomic discourse of building a marketable individual self to develop the post-Mao neoliberal market economy (Xiao, 2006: 63). This means that many contestants in *Super Girl Voice* are adept at providing sentimental narrations to attract public votes via text-messaging. In comparison, *Chinese Dream Show* is a closed neoliberal theatre where dream-seekers ask for help from sponsors, usually in the form of money. This builds a close tie between capital and the dream-fulfilment conveyed by sponsors, termed dream-helpers in the show's own discourse. The dream-helpers and the dream-jury appear to have full autonomy. When dream-helpers propose an assistance plan, three hundred live audience members can decide whether to approve or reject it. However, both neoliberal rationale and the sentimental presentations of dream-seekers hijack the will of dream-helpers and dream-juries on the basis of the moral common ground shaped by the Chinese Dream and Harmonious Society political ideals. On the one side, sponsors acting as dream-helpers pay for the presence of their representatives in the show, where they hope the assistance plans will be commonly associated with their own brand images. In Yang's case, the representative of the TV shopping company Best1 mentions not only financial support but also suggests selling Yang's works on its own platform. Therefore, proposing assistance plans functions as an indirect advertising method that is integrated into the show's content. On the other side, the degree of sentiment expressed has the potential to become a decisive standard for evaluating dreams, directly impacting the final result. Facing vulnerable dream-seekers expressing the difficulties of their lives, dream-helpers are bound to make generous decisions, largely because they are under the surveillance of the public. Inspired by this kind of emotional atmosphere, most live audiences aid dream-seekers in doing a good deed by voting to support the assistance plans. When any depiction of the government is absent on the public interest talent show, the market and other social members actually assume responsibility for perfecting the para-citizenship of vulnerable dream-seekers under the surveillance of the party-ordained moral order. As a result, a predictable happy ending almost becomes the norm for the dream narratives in the show. The main selling point of the show is articulation of one story after another between neoliberal rationality and sentimentality within the moral logic of the Chinese Dream.

In addition, the two-sided neoliberal representation of Yang Pei notably produces what can be termed a dilemma of disabled femininity, a paradoxical situation where the discursive intersection of neoliberal rationality and sentimentality revolving around the dream narrative reinforces the stereotypes of both disability and femininity in the Chinese context. The logic of neoliberal rationality mainly reflects her marginalised identity as a disabled person with little concentration on gender issues, portraying Yang as having defeated her upper limb amputation to finish an exquisite embroidery. To some degree, this is the neoliberalised continuation of not only what Dauncey (2007) calls "the politics of looking good", to which the representation or nonrepresentation of disability from the Mao to the post-Mao era is inextricably tied, but also the 'supercrip' narrative that refers to someone who is portrayed as having overcome their disability in ways that the general public finds encouraging (Dauncey, 2020: 29; Gliedman &

Roth, 1980). The supercrip-related representation of disabled people can create unrealistic expectations for all people with impairments so as to underestimate the difficulties that they have to face in their everyday activities. Moreover, the discourse of neoliberal sentimentality is mainly articulated around her femininity, narrating her personal tragedy in which she and her family members are metaphorically represented in order to strengthen the vulnerability of women and especially those from the countryside in the patriarchal system. Within the narrative universe of the Chinese Dream, the sponsors and live audience have to play a positive role in reinforcing the established patriarchy through philanthropic efforts. As the intersectionality of Yang's multiple vulnerable identities as a rural woman with a disability - her para-citizenship - has been turned into a competitive advantage in the neoliberal theatre, Yang's emotional tears demonstrate that the neoliberal logic in which the strong prey upon the weak has been reconfigured in such a way that it is possible to win through showing weakness in the name of public interest. This is the key Chinese characteristic of the neoliberal theatre, where the agency of the social groups she represents is absent. In addition, it is also paradoxical that people with disabilities have at least the opportunity to appear on television entertainment in the name of public interest, while they along with other non-normative social groups have long lacked representation anywhere else. This absence of representation has been compounded by the rise of professional talent shows, such as the *I Am a Singer* series, a talent show subgenre in which many famous talented celebrities or veterans compete for their own professional skills with each other. This is perhaps the most significant dilemma for representing Chinese para-citizenship beyond stereotypes and absences.

4. Conclusion

The trajectory of globally dominated neoliberal culture has been incarnated in the popularity of talent shows. This Western-invented television entertainment genre characterised by mass participation and popular voting has appeared in almost all major countries around the world. As neoliberal orders are not monolithic, the cultural-political implications of talent shows may be historically and geographically contingent and vary over time. Rather than adhering to the Super Girl model of copying Western counterparts, state-run television stations have imported a lot of foreign talent show franchises into China's television entertainment market since 2010 and have since localised the Western-inspired genre to the cultural-political atmosphere of contemporary China. As I have argued above, China's talent shows have thus become both politically correct and economically lucrative cultural products, striking a balance between the officials and commercial media institutions.

This article meanwhile sheds light on the cultural reorientation of talent shows as articulated around the Chinese Dream discourse. The talent show genre has increasingly sought to cast off its associations with vulgarity, catering to the Chinese Dream and then forming their own discursive characteristics. As analysis of the Chinese Dream motto indicates, the party-state inserts Confucianism and nationalism into governing the potential or already extant ideological conflict between the state and individuals. The party-ordained moral order furthermore creates socialist narratives using neoliberal mechanisms in the landscape of the state-controlled market economy. By expanding upon the vision of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the party-state has used television entertainment programmes to convey a grand imagination of the Chinese Dream and to consolidate the legitimacy of its rule.

If Anglo-American talent shows and their early Chinese counterparts are articulated around the discursive representations of pure neoliberal dreams, today, China's talent shows have gradually become a neoliberal theatre with Chinese characteristics through their

developmental process. In *Chinese Dream Show*, the discursive formula of public interest portrays the idealised moral universe that the party-state expects, indicating that this Western-invented genre has been assimilated into the party-state ideological agenda. This further forces this lucrative business into complying with SARFT's censorship and regulation. *Chinese Dream Show* deliberately divides neoliberalism into two parts: neoliberal rationality and neoliberal sentimentality; in this dichotomy, the market is presented as an effective force to merge different individual interests into a cultural and moral order of the collective, social and public Chinese Dream. The representation of the public interest is largely based on a narrative logic: while contestants rationally and convincingly demonstrate the feasibility of their dreams, they must employ emotional and moral persuasion to seek their dreams. They must in effect kidnap the market in the name of preserving the public interest.

It is of importance that Chinese Dream Show is compellingly articulated in the dream narratives by connecting national with individual dreams as well as bridging the gap between the party-state and the market. Especially, at a time when Western-invented genres centred on neoliberal individualistic values have inspired people to consider the possibility of social change, state-owned television stations have undertaken the cultural-political responsibility for reclaiming and rebuilding the function of talent shows. Nevertheless, dream narratives have increasingly become dissociated from the real dilemmas people face in their daily lives. While these inspiring dream stories are thoroughly integrated into the collective imagination of the Chinese Dream, talent shows have served as a prescription for relieving the complicated social contradictions that have arisen during the prolonged and dramatic transformation of Chinese society. This is not only due to the ideological will of the party-state, but also the audience-centred predicament of neoliberal television entertainment with Chinese characteristics.

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