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**Cultural policy, ideology and national
development in China –
the historical crisis of the Communist Party's
management of culture**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Policy
Studies

University of Warwick, Centre for Cultural and Media
Policy Studies

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Declaration

I declare that the present thesis is the result of my own work. I would also like to confirm that neither the thesis nor parts of it has ever been submitted before for a degree at another university.

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Abstract

The principal purpose of this thesis is to examine how the strategic political frameworks of the People's Republic of China have historically informed national cultural policy, and today maintain cultural policy as an important official mechanism for both national economic development and the dissemination and inculcation of political ideology. The primary rationale for this study is to extend the scholarly orbit of contemporary cultural policy research. The investigation that forms this thesis explores how, historically in China, cultural policy became a medium of ideology, strategically utilised by the central government for both national economic development and the manifestation of political legitimacy. It then analyses, again historically, the party's ideological project. In doing this, the thesis seeks to explain why the 'mass line' of culture – a fundamental principle of the party's ideological project – is a determining fulcrum for policies that serve the symbiotic maintenance of China's economic growth and the CPC's (The Communist Party of China, henceforth the CPC) perpetual ideological formation and re-formation.

Following the historical examination in its early chapters, the thesis investigation proceeds to a second historical examination of the Government-controlled institutional reform of China's cultural system. By way of examining the cultural changes provoked by the institutional reforms, the thesis proffers China's television sector as a primary field of cultural production in which changes can be identified and subject to critical reflection. Through critical reflection, the investigation reveals how cultural policy remains a central medium not only of CPC ideology, but of governmental authority and legitimacy, and where ideology, authority and legitimacy converge and are manifest as a perpetual crisis of political contradiction. The thesis' argument concerns this perpetual crisis in the context of China's governmental international commitments to sustainable development, notable for its sponsorship of various UNESCO cultural projects.

This thesis thus aspires to demonstrate a current dilemma for China as a growing global power, and whose self-identification with Chinese 'culture' is essential to its ideological evolution and continuity as much as its continued economic viability. Such dilemma, I argue, lies in the structural contradictions animating the Government's management of culture, and the increasing division between the culture of everyday life ('ordinary people' and their ways of life), and State directed national economic development.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Thesis Outline

The subject of this thesis is the relation between culture, ideology and national development in contemporary China. I explore how cultural policy in China is a medium of ideology, strategically calibrated to function as an instrument of national development. It is burdened with meeting the twin aims of national imperatives (economic development and increasing effectiveness of socialist government) and international imperatives (principally of sustainable development, but also economic development through the internationalisation of markets and professional mobility). I investigate this subject historically, as given the communist political economy of China is deeply historical in terms of its ideological reference points, self-representation, political validation and justification. The main argument of this thesis is that the Chinese central Government has hugely invested in the management of culture, however, the character of this investment reveals structural contradictions in the relation between ideology and material practice (between the political rationales and ideals propagated by the Government, and the actual conditions of culture on the ground), which severely limits the fulfilment of culture's positive roles in the construction of 'socialist culture' or China's national development. To explore this contradiction, it first points out that policy makers in China aim to fulfill multiple political objectives through cultural policy, and among which, culture has been closely connected to the ideological construction of the Communist Party of China (the CPC) and China's national development. Focusing on the 'mass-line' of culture – a key ideological and cultural principle of the Communist Party, which requires cultural works to provide detailed and truthful depictions of ordinary people's cultures and daily lives – the thesis explains the crucial

importance of this principle to the Party's own ideological project as well as to the fulfillment of culture's contributive roles to China's economic development. It then examines the systematic reforming process of China's cultural sector, which, along with the CPC's ideological requirements and principles, provide a relatively full picture of the state's cultural policy. In the second part of the thesis, I investigate and analyse the impacts of China's cultural policy on the development of China's television industry (which is a key cultural sector in China), with a particular focus on its ability to adhere to the 'mass-line' of culture. My investigations discover that due to the institutional environment of China's cultural system, the nation's TV sector has a systematic tendency to eschew ordinary people and their cultures in content production, which in turn leads to major frustrations to the Communist Party's project of ideological construction. At the same time, my examination of the television sector's failure to adhere to the 'mass line' is likely to have wider negative implications on the maintenance and enhancement of culture's roles in China's national development.

This thesis is driven by two primary research questions: 1). What is the rationale for the Chinese Government's control and political management of the cultural and creative sectors? and 2). Whether the Government's cultural policy is achieving its own objectives? The methodological approach to the thesis' investigation is a 'critical-historical' approach insofar as it aims to connect the common semantic distinction between the 'critical' and the 'practical' in cultural policy research on China (discussed in Chapter Two, with references), and integrate an analysis of the strategic pragmatism of national policy aims with the critical 'hermeneutics' (an interpretative orientation) of cultural historical research. The emphasis of this thesis is the 'culture' in cultural policy – and its re-introduction into cultural policy research, along with 'nation building', which in the West was more typical of Post-War period. In the West, culture as what

Raymond Williams termed 'a whole way of life' (Williams, 1958) has been eroded as a substantial focus of cultural policies by post-war anti-nationalism (and consequent internationalism), and by mass culture, media and social diversity (increasing multiculturalism) and all the facets of globalisation. In China, however, while this is also the case to some degree, the question of Chinese 'culture' is both central to national public policy and internal to the politics of cultural policies specifically. This is made complex as Chinese culture (history, identity and values) as represented and framed by China's public policies are, in their very iteration as public directives, subject to a socialist 'hermeneutic' – that is, interpreted by and through a political lexicon constructed to articulate, above all, China's Communist Party's political aims.

I therefore define 'cultural policy studies' not just as a study of particular policies (and also their origins and implementation), but the political economy of policy discourse and practice – as in China, policy is a realm of ideology and values, predicated on the history, identity and future aspirations of the contemporary Chinese state (I elaborate on this in Section Two, below). This thesis also takes television as a major object of analysis in a national cultural policy study. While in the West, television has been an increasing subject of specialist study outside of cultural policy, with a predominant concern with content and its ideological impacts (and, within cultural policy, as a discrete field of 'audiovisual' or broadcast media regulation), in China the role of TV – this thesis maintains – is significant. I defend this choice in Chapter Two, and outline how TV is central to China's national cultural policy aims. In this, I do not aim to perform a 'TV studies' approach or construct a sub-field of cultural policy studies as conducted in the West. This thesis takes TV as an object of cultural policy study itself.

My research has been deeply shaped by years of working in the cultural sector

and prolonged conversations with cultural practitioners in China. Between 2011 and 2014, I was employed for 24 months as a news editor by Hubei Provincial Television, and then I worked for 18 months as a university lecturer in Wuhan (China) with a research focus on the nation's cultural industries and government policies. Since the start of this PhD project in 2014, I have continued to communicate extensively with Chinese scholars and cultural practitioners from various fields (particularly TV, film, newspaper and magazines). The importance of culture and cultural products for people's everyday life, the contradictions of the government's management of culture, and the relations between cultural policy and the Party's socialist construction are recurrent themes that caught my attention both as a cultural practitioner and as an academic researcher. My personal connections, working experience and critical attitudes towards cultural policy have greatly befitted the empirical research, and particularly in identifying interviewees and building trust with cultural practitioners.

1.2 Research background

In the last ten years, China has deliberately entered the arena of global cultural policy, and positioned itself as an agent of sustainable development through culture. A key symbolic moment is the Chinese Government's sponsorship of the second World Cultural Forum, which produced the *Hangzhou Declaration: Placing Culture at the Heart of Sustainable Development Policies* (UNESCO, 2013). In her opening speech at the conference, China's Vice-Premier Liu Yandong emphasised the inextricable connection between culture and a nation's developmental path, and urged governments around the world to respect cultural diversity and the existence of different ways of national development (Zhejiang Daily, 2013). According to her:

Nowadays, the world is in a period of great development, great change and great adjustment. The role of culture in national development and human progress is becoming increasingly prominent... It is urgent that culture becomes the supporting force of economy and society, and the all-around development of humans (cited in *Zhejiang Daily*, 2013: 01).

The Chinese Government's recognition of the close connections between culture and national development, and its emphasis on the 'enhancement' of humans through culture are profoundly influenced by China's history and philosophy of cultural management.

The modern word 'culture' (文化) was introduced to China around the 19th Century as a Western term translated by the Japanese (Liu et al., 1984: 364). Before that, 'culture' was often used in the Chinese language as two separate yet complementary words: 'wen' (文) and 'hua' (化). The etymological root of the words 'wen' and 'hua' can be traced back to the *Book of Changes* (易经) – a classic divination and one of the most important texts in Chinese philosophy. The book records that 'one observes the heaven to perceive time and change, and one examines the patterns of humanity (*wen*) to understand and manage the processes of transformation (*hua*) under the heaven' (quoted in Zhu, 1998: 14). In ancient Chinese language, the character 'wen' originally meant the texture, colour and pattern of things. Later, it also refers to the morality, rituals, customs and worldviews that govern personal and social lives. 'Hua' means to change, to convert one thing into another. Together, they refer to the transformation of natural beings into social beings, and the management of society through humanity (Yan and Yan, 2002: 5).

Theories of culture developed in China, traditionally focused on humanity, and

perceive human ethics as the essence of life and the source of social order. Confucianism, for example, centers on the importance of spirits and rituals. It revives and creates rituals as manifestations of morality, and demands humans to internalise moral standards and act according to ritual norms so both can be constantly reinforced and perfected. Confucius stressed that people should spend their whole lives cultivating morality and virtue; he stipulated specific moral codes and behavioural standards for people with various social status and in different relationships such as ruler, subject, father, son, husband, wife, older brother and younger brother (Liu, 2018: 91). Later, the moral principles of Confucianism were crystallised into five 'constant regulations' (*wuchang*) as 'natural laws' that govern all virtues, namely: benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), manners (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*), and faithfulness (*xin*).

Confucianism, however, is much more than a cultural and moral philosophy that cultivates individuals' consciousness and actions. It has also been perceived and utilised by government officials (most of them were Confucian scholars, as the civil service examination system was based on Confucian classics) and rulers for thousands of years (with a few interruptions) as the foundation of political and social systems. Indeed, as pointed out by China's leading philosopher Li Zehou, Confucianism is 'characterised by its extreme practicality in real lives' (Li, 1985: 30), and it offers the 'correct' ways of lives not only to the mass public but also to the ruling elites (ibid., 43). A central tenet of Confucianism is that a nation should be managed by virtuous people rather than by formal laws, and rulers should be sages or at least be 'exemplary people' (*君子*) who govern through morality rather than military or punitive powers (Yao, 2003: 121). Confucianism judges a good government by how rarely it requires the law, and a nation's dependency on formal regulations is deemed as a reflection of the failure of a society to follow morality and rituals (Tan, 2003: 183).

The cultural policy of the Communist Party of China is clearly influenced by China's own history during which regimes governed through ideology and culture. Although in Mao's China, Confucianism was officially denounced and repeatedly attacked for its representation of feudalism, Mao Zedong did share with Confucian scholars the pivotal doctrine that the construction and management of a nation should be grounded in ideological education and the creation of 'correct' human thinking and thus individual agency. As Chapter Three will discuss in detail, throughout his life Mao Zedong was philosophically preoccupied with the nature of human consciousness, and he aimed to build a dominant culture based on the integration of consciousness of the proletariat, intellectuals and Party members. The 'socialist culture' constructed by the Communist Party, with revolutionary ideology at its core, served as the very foundation of both class struggle and national development between 1949 and 1976. Instead of relying on the marketplace, rational 'economic man', formal laws and regulations for social and economic development, Maoist leaders marginalised the importance of formal institutions (law was treated by them as a key element of capitalist society) (McCormick, 1990: 100; Herrmann-Pillath, 2016: 96), and perceived selfless 'communist man' as the building block of socialism. With proper ideological education, people who have internalised revolutionary ideologies were believed by the ruling elites to be able to fully devote to socialism with tremendous energy and enthusiasm, whether in struggles with the capitalist class or economic construction. Cultural policy, or 'policies on literature and art' as Mao Zedong referred to (Mao, 1991: 23), played a crucial role as cultural workers are responsible for the 'creation' of such socialist subjects.

In China's reform era, however, the ruling elites largely abandoned the

revolutionary project and introduced 'socialist market economy' as the central mechanism for economic development. The use of culture has also been greatly expanded in policy makers' lexicography (notably, it is now correlated with 'creativity' and cultural 'industries', and is even related to technological innovation and the development of science). However, the beliefs that culture shapes people's minds and actions in everyday lives – and should therefore be guided by ruling ideologies in order to maintain order and propel social progress – remains a dominant imperative in policy making. The ideological and socially progressive nature of such culture can be discerned from its standard definition provided by *Ci Hai (Encyclopaedia of Standard Mandarin Chinese)* that, '[c]ulture, in a broad sense, refers to the sum total of all the material and spiritual wealth created by humans during the historical development of society; in a narrow sense, it refers to ideologies, their related institutions and organisations created in the process of social development' (Xia, 1989: 1231). Because of this, the cultural sector in China has been stringently controlled and carefully managed by the party-run state. In contemporary China, the interconnection of culture to politics and society are as necessary as they are complicated. According to Han Yongjin, a former high-ranking officer of the Central Propaganda Department and the Ministry of Culture, policy makers recognise the significance of China's cultural sector in key aspects. First, culture is important for development. This is not only because a powerful socialist nation necessarily requires the growth of a strong socialist culture in its own right, but also because culture contributes to the comprehensive development of the country's economic, political and social dimensions (Han, 2012: 47-48; 108-123). Second, the cultural sector should consolidate the position of the CPC as the leader of China's socialist cause, and should always follow the Party's ideological demands (112-114). Third, because Chinese people are the main force of China's socialist cause, the cultural sector should fulfill the spiritual

needs of the people, reflect their values and aspirations, and educate them into the ideal 'socialist men' (115-118).

In today's China, central Government's cultural policies, as the range of activities it undertakes in the field of culture (Gray, 2010: 222), are often issued by key Party and Government institutions that are responsible for the management of culture (such as the Central Propaganda Department and the Ministry of Culture), through the Government's national development plans, and top leaders' formal speeches, and written or oral instructions. The focuses of culture in policy makings, as summarised by Han Yongjin, are clearly reflected in the key policy documents and leaders' speeches in the recent decade. In President Xi Jinping's report at the opening session of the 19th National Congress¹ of the Communist Party of China convened in July 2017, for example, the crucial importance of culture for national development was declared first. According to Xi Jinping, 'Culture is a country and nation's soul. Our country will thrive only if our culture thrives, and our nation will be strong only if our culture is strong' (Xi, 2017a, paragraph 2). He then went on to define the key components of 'socialist culture', which includes 'China's fine traditional culture', the Party's 'revolutionary culture' and 'advanced socialist culture' developed in the reform era (paragraph 3). The importance of the Party's ideology in sustaining socialist culture was subsequently emphasised, and he stated that 'ideology determines the direction a culture should take and the path it should follow as it develops' (paragraph 4), and stressed the importance of developing 'a socialist ideology that has the ability to unite and the power to inspire the people to embrace shared ideals, convictions, values, and moral standards' (paragraph 4). Finally, Xi Jinping called on cultural workers and

¹ The National Congress of the CPC is a party congress that is convened every five years. During the event, the CPC outlines the general directions, principles and policies of national development for the next five years.

Government institutions. He required the former to promote ‘socialist literature and art’ by taking ‘a people-centred approach and draw inspiration from everyday life and the experiences of the people to produce works that do justice to our times’ and by ‘cultivating fine tastes, style, and a sense of responsibility while rejecting vulgarity and kitsch’ (paragraph 7). Policy makers, according to Xi Jinping, needed to ‘deepen structural reform of the cultural sector, improve the cultural management system, and accelerate the establishment of systems and mechanisms that put social benefits first while pursuing economic returns’ (paragraph 8).

1.3 Research Arrangement and Argument

It must be emphasised at the outset, that although in the West broadcast media – and particularly TV – is to some degree explicit in its relation to government (law, regulation, the public, and so on) and for the purposes of research does not easily sit within the categories of ‘culture’ or ‘creative industries’, my subject nonetheless remains ‘cultural policy’. The rationale for this is both theoretical and methodological. Theoretically, the ideological conditions of television production in China can only be fully understood in relation to the Government’s broader position on ‘culture’ and the historical constructs of value that pertain to the CPC’s conception of culture in China. Methodologically, a contemporary broadcast history or ‘creative industries’ approach will not in itself provide for a study of TV that understands television as central to a political economy of culture under communism. Throughout the thesis I therefore refer to ‘culture’, ‘cultural system’, ‘cultural sector’, and ‘cultural policy’ – rather than broadcast policy, ‘culture and creative sectors’, or ‘creative industries’.

Chapter Two points out that the Chinese Government has historically and

systematically employed cultural policies in order to achieve national developmental aims, and that the political leaders in China have entered the global cultural policy arena and positioned historic Chinese culture as the foundation of China's developmental path. It examines the connections between cultural policy and China's national development, and demonstrates that political elites aim to maintain and enhance China's decentralised economic system as well as to create citizens who actively participate in the construction of an ordered and sustainable 'socialist society.' The chapter argues that a compelling analysis of China's cultural policy requires critical-historical examination of the Communist Party's policies and agendas of culture, rather than treating culture merely as a mediator of Western democracy.

Chapter Three examines the Communist Party's ideological project since the Mao era, so as then to focus on the ideological conditions of cultural development in contemporary China. By putting the key components of the Party's ideological requirements (positive propaganda, patriotism, morality and the mass line of culture) within the context of China's national development in the reform era, this chapter explains why, for China's ruling elite, having a cultural sector that fulfils the mass line of culture (i.e., concentrates on the production of works which portray ordinary people's cultures and lives) determines the success or failure of the Party's entire ideological project. The ability of China's cultural sector to stick to the mass line of culture, this chapter points out, is crucially important for the Party's management of culture for both ideological construction and national development.

Chapter Four traces China's cultural system reform (with a focus on TV, newspaper and film industry reforms) since the 1980s. My purpose is to examine the institutional arrangements constructed by the party-state over and

within the cultural system in order to fulfill its agendas for culture. This chapter finds that the cultural system reform has been a prolonged process of experiments, adaptations, rectification and strategic planning orchestrated by the central propaganda system with the aims of consolidating the Party's control and leadership over the entire cultural sphere on the one hand and enhancing the market competitiveness of China's cultural sector (particularly state-owned enterprises) on the other.

Chapters Five and Six investigate the developmental status of China's television sector under the influence of both the Party's ideological requirements (discussed in Chapter Three) and the institutional arrangements established by central Government (examined by Chapter Four). These two chapters focus on two types of television programmes: (i) the Minsheng programme – a kind of news-related programme that is widely produced by China's territorial television stations, and (ii) 'reality' shows – the type of programme that has been dominating China's television screens in recent years. Through extensive interviews with television practitioners and government officials (in China's cultural sector a person can take both roles simultaneously) and examinations of secondary data sources, the thesis inquires into the developmental situations of China's local regional territorial channels and provincial satellite channels. It questions their ability to adhere to the 'mass line' of culture, and how it is closely correlated to the success and frustrations of the Party's project of ideological construction.

The concluding chapter summarises the research findings concerning the structural crisis of China's cultural policy which severely frustrates the Party's ideological project. It is then followed by recommendations to the Chinese central Government in order to better fulfill its multi-agendas for culture.

The central argument of this thesis is, to reiterate, that the Chinese central Government has hugely invested in the management of culture for national developmental aims. However, its cultural policy reveals structural crisis animating national political economy – embedded in the relation between governmental power and institutions and the actual conditions of culture practiced by the masses, which severely limits the fulfilment of culture's positive roles in the construction of 'socialist culture' or China's national development.

Chapter Two:

The Multi-agendas of State's Cultural Policy in China

2.1 Culture for democracy and cultural industries – approaches to China's cultural policy

'Cultural policy studies' is not an established field in China's academia. There are only a dozen published books in China with 'cultural policy' (文化政策) in the titles, and the majority of them focus on introducing and analysing policies in the West. In the English language, only a few journal articles and book chapters (e.g., White and Xu, 2012; Keane and Zhao, 2014; Su, 2015) have China's cultural policy as their primary concern (however, as discussed below, the studies of China's media sector (particularly with Government's media policies as a major research subject), has been developing for decades.

Cultural policy in the West, although a relatively new academic field, has been studied by scholars from a range of disciplines, from aesthetics and cultural studies, economics and sociology (Kawashima, 2015: 453; Gray, 2010: 218). In his seminal review article, "The Torn Halves of Cultural Policy Research", Oliver Bennett examines two key books with two distinctively different approaches to cultural policy. The first (*Critical Cultural Policy Studies: A Reader* co-edited by Justin Lewis and Toby Miller) consists of articles written by scholars from 'communications, media or cultural studies' (Bennett, 2004: 237), and who perceive cultural policy as national governance, aspiring to influence and shape people into compliant citizens. Their primary focus is cultural texts and practices as being permeated by political power, which is an occasion to identify forms of domination embedded in all national governance systems, and conversely award support to forms of citizen or 'grassroots' resistance to the

established order. The second book (*Informing Cultural Policy: The Research and Information Infrastructure* by Mark Schuster) articulates a very different cultural policy studies framework – as something through which government itself, and its institutions, determine the media and function of research methods and data, and where advocacy, evaluation and problem-solving as internal to the process of public policy making represent its primary purpose. Where in the USA and UK, and to some extent the EU, public policymaking has been increasingly called upon to demonstrate its economic efficiency, demanding the consistent collection and assessment of empirical and statistical data to enhance performance and elicit advocacy. Bennett casts these two frameworks as the two poles of two important yet ‘mutually incompatible’ approaches to cultural policy in contemporary Anglo-American countries: the one exploring policy making as embedded in power and ideology, the other engaging with cultural policy ‘apolitically’ or at least functionally as a means to delivering on policy agendas and objectives on behalf of government (ibid., 224).

The divide between what Bennett viewed as ‘critical’ and ‘practical’ frameworks of cultural policy studies, in the English literature specifically, can be traced back to the 1990s when within the Humanities and social sciences generally enquiries concerning ideological dominance and class struggles (in Marxist terms) declined with the seeming disappearance of any ‘alternatives’ to capitalism and liberal democracy. Some scholars found the now established Cultural Studies – an interdisciplinary field surprisingly cohesive in part based on the influence of Marxist philosophy as well as a culturally ‘progressive’ and ‘radical-democratic’ mission against elitism and ideological hegemony (ibid., 238-239) – was increasingly detached from the institutional practices and realities of cultural governance, or the actual policy administration of culture. As a means of reviving Cultural Studies from a detachment-induced decline, it was

necessary, as Tony Bennett (among others) argued nearly three decades ago, that research engaged with the realm of government and its administrative needs (Bennett, 1990). To facilitate effective engagement with the world of practical governmental realities, and their communications and corporate partnerships, researchers should undertake the role as 'cultural technicians' as opposed to (or at least in addition to) 'cultural critics' (O'Regan, 1992: 413; O'Brien, 2013: 36-37). Since the 1990s, with the rise in dominance of 'economic' and 'managerial' knowledge in public policymaking (Garnham, 2005: 16; Gray, 2006; 2007; Belfiore, 2012), along with successive governments', Left and Right, celebrating the power of the market in both creating wealth and facilitating creative industries (Oakley, 2004; Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005: 7; Flew and Cunningham, 2010), cultural policy research should be influencing policymaking agendas, and interests. On the other hand, there are scholars who retain an exclusive commitment to historic critical and humanities traditions by asserting culture's potential for transformation, alternative values, models of social democracy and so on. However, such research agendas and ambitions are de facto marginalised and increasingly ignored by policymakers (O'Connor, 2016). As Bennett (2005: 246) argued (notoriously) in his review essay that cultural policy research 'can be practical, or it can be critical, but it can never be both at the same time'.

Interestingly perhaps, critical and practical approaches also constitute two major agendas among studies on China's cultural policy and the media sector, although they exist in very different forms. Many researchers have examined and commented critically on the Chinese government's activities in the area of culture for their violation of the normative standards and values of 'democracy' (e.g., Zhao, 1998; 2008; Lagerkvist, 2010; Xie, 2014). Their studies tend to appeal to a Western consensus on what democratic standards and values are

(representation, accountability, and so forth), which not only divert scholars' attention from Chinese Government's own plans for culture, but also severely limit any 'usefulness' that they can produce to policymakers in China. On the other, for researchers on China who focus primarily on cultural and creative industries (as commercial industries that have been promoted by the Chinese Government), they are prone to downplay or even ignore the ideological nature of cultural policies – implemented by one of the most politically repressive regimes in the world.

It might sound like a truism, that research on a nation's cultural policies should pay attention to the relation between rhetoric and reality, or between the main agendas set by policymakers and their efficacy in stimulating the practical achievement of policy aims. However, this is arguably not the case for academic research on China's cultural policy and cultural sector in the English literature². While there is little (if any) research that has examined China's cultural policies and their implications for the nation's 'culture' in general (or even the entire cultural sphere, including arts, heritage and cultural institutions), research concerning the nation's media sector, conversely, have long been considered as constituting an established academic field. Since its emergence, however, 'Chinese media studies' has rarely focused on the Communist Party's agendas for culture. Rather, it has been preoccupied with an overriding and normative concern – China as viewed within the demands of Western-style democracy (Zhao, 2015: 15). The dominance of the 'democracy question', as Keane (2011a: 83) points out, has much to do with how most Chinese scholars (who write in English) are educated in the West, and consequently tend to align the

² As Section 2.5 will discuss, while scholars have paid close attention to the Central government policies and political agendas concerning culture, they tend to evade an intensive investigation of the efficacy of China's national cultural policy – its political motivation and impact – in order to avoid direct criticism, and consequently opposition, of Government.

development of China's cultural sector with 'free world' (particularly the US and the UK) concerns for media independence, freedom of speech and civil society. In a broader sense, this is also symptomatic of the global predominance of liberal democratic-inspired ideas, values and models of management and governance mediated through ever expanding Western media corporations and conglomerates, who see non-Western nations such as China as not simply emerging markets but as a 'testing ground' for Western value agendas (Wang, 2011a; Lee, 2011; Dong, 2011). A salient consequence of Chinese media studies' intellectual dependency on Western democratic norms, is that the Chinese Government's own cultural policies (policy making and institutional practices) are often subject to an interpretative dichotomy of 'good versus evil' (the Party-State being portrayed as an authoritarian force while those who break or resist regulations are seen as 'democratic' and 'liberating'). Such a pervasive approach provides for a limited view of China's cultural policy. Further, an approach of that sort is of little use when it comes to facilitating change in China's Central government agendas (cf. Bennett, 2004). Nor does it accommodate difficult questions about the assumptions on which it rests. For example, will China become more democratic with the transference of the cultural sector to private corporations or to Chinese citizens themselves?

In Western cultural policy research, one of the most visible approaches to China is what one might refer to as the 'creative industries approach' to China's political economy (usually focusing on the media and cultural sector, rather than the full breadth of creative industries, from TV to internet or software). Political economic studies of China's creative industries have engendered 'robustness and longevity' for its close examination of China's cultural policies as well as the ownership and operations of cultural units (Keane, 2011a: 83), since the late 1990s concentrating on two major and interconnected objects of research:

(i) the CPC and whether it is losing or maintaining control of the media sector; and (ii) the commercialisation of media and whether it is a stimulus for Chinese society's progress towards democracy (Akhavan-Majid , 2004: 554; Hadland, 2012: 254-255). Before the early 2000s, when the Chinese Government was experimenting with commercialisation and the decentralisation of the cultural system (see Chapter Four), the media industry was evolving new dimensions of production – investigative journalism (and local news workers' defiance of central propaganda guidelines), increasing independence from central Party media outlets, and the rise of entertainment programmes and human interest stories. These were viewed by many as signs or 'evidence' that previous state monopolies of governmental power were dissolving in their historic powers of command, resulting in new political freedoms and potentially liberalisation and the increasing democratisation of Chinese society (e.g., Zhang, 1993; Huang, 1994; Pei, 1994; Huang and Yu, 1997a; Wu, 2000; Hao, Huang and Zhang, 1998).

However, since the 2000s, most of the visible 'democratic indicators' have gradually dissipated. Central government has (arguably) reformed and re-centralised its original political command-style management of the cultural domain, and consequently enhanced official regulatory and administrative measures. The new non-state-owned capital, assets, and corporations, and the new institutional arrangements for political directives, attract a less confrontational (if still ubiquitous) form of media censorship and concomitant monitoring apparatus (Zhao, 2008; Brady, 2008; Hong, 2014; see also Chapter Four). Many scholars have also realised that instead of liberating China's media sector from the Party's grip, the commercialisation has actually created firm alliances between political and economic powers, enriching and empowering politically compliant or simply a-political 'cultural entrepreneurs' (many of whom

are either in the employ of, or networked within, central Government authorities). The CPC's 'control' is no longer brutal and direct, but nonetheless further entrenched and consolidated (cultural workers have to be politically compliant if they want to survive in the marketplace) (Zhao, 1998; 2008; Zhou, 2009; Stockmann, 2013; Hearn-Branaman, 2014; Xie, 2014). By the early 2010s, a growing consensus had been reached among scholars that China's cultural and media industries, like the nation's political and social development in more general terms, were not progressively liberalising (Hadland, 2012: 255). This 'consensus' has undoubtedly been further enhanced since President Xi Jinping took office in 2013, with overwhelming priority given by his administration to the centralisation of power in virtually all aspects of China – so the CPC can lead, in Xi Jinping's own words, 'everything' (Xi, 2017a).

In the face of an implacable consolidation of political hegemony, some scholars have suggested alternative frameworks to the normative 'authoritarian state versus the liberating market' or 'state in collusion with the market' approaches (e.g., Keane, 2015). One such alternative, is to shift emphasis away from state policies and power and instead focus on the new forms of power and discourse coming into play at other levels of civil society – including community-based, and 'grassroots' institutions and practices (Lagerkvist, 2014: 126). Investigating public discourse in the media (particularly on the internet), some exemplary research has aimed at identifying the emergence of 'democratic signifiers' and the intellectual conditions of political liberalisation in China's civil society, such as individualisation or critical reflection (Berry, 2009; Sima, 2011; Jiang, 2014; Wu, 2017; Zheng and Yu, 2016). This also includes China's non-governmental organisations (Huang, 2017), its emergent citizen journalism (Nip, 2009; Xin, 2010; Hung, 2013), and a growing demand on the part of the people for political participation (Zhang and Lin, 2014; Sullivan, 2014; Wei and Zhao, 2017).

Another alternate way of approaching China as an object of cultural research, is to use economics and economic-based analysis in tandem or partnership with Central government's own policy research. By focusing on the economics of culture (in ways that have been officially recognised and actively promoted by the Party-state since the early 2000s under the rubric of 'cultural and creative industries'), many scholars have found a way of making cultural research compatible with the policy process and its use of data and statistical analyses. A multitude of scholarly articles, research reports, and major books, have emerged, ostensibly contributing to the management of China's political economy. Written by scholars aiming to measure, evaluate, and promote cultural and creative industries viewed as an economic sector (e.g., Wu, 2006; Ye, 2008; Zheng, 2011; Xiang and Walker, 2013; Si, 2016), questions concerning social and political context, have become less visible. Indeed, scholars like the influential Australian Michael Keane, have explicitly called for a more pragmatic engagement with governing institutions and the organs of policymaking, advocating that researchers move beyond the 'conventional disciplinary boundaries of media and cultural studies' with its emphasis on 'ideological representations' (Keane, 2013: 4). Keane's published research (e.g., Keane, 2006; 2007; 2009; 2011b; 2013; 2015) are characterised by a commitment to an empirical analysis of Government policy in terms of organisational structures, production and development. Involving a concern to local economic development, particularly in the major and innovative municipal centres (cities), Keane's concerns are more explanatory than critical, and less operating on a Western democratic opposition to the Chinese political economy *per se* than motivated by a concern to comprehend China's uniqueness, innovation and management of values. His research output together tends to form a representation of China as a maturing professional cultural and media

sector, innovating and progressing towards the formation of creative economy models from which we can learn, despite evident CPC's political and ideological control.

Notwithstanding the value of current mainstream research and scholarship on China's cultural and creative industries, this thesis is predicated on the limited facility they all display in responding to two fundamental (and very visible) concerns China provokes (i) why is culture and creative industries an object of such a concerted political investment – a huge institutionally-mediate political management, animated by political rationales and motivations central to the ideological project of the CPC? And, (ii) given the CPC's investment in culture and creativity, what opportunities can be defined in this fast-evolving sphere of production, communication and discourse – and what potential rationales might present themselves compatible with current political imperatives and so potentially facilitate an evolution in Party-State policy and management? Research that is constituted primarily as political critique (casting China simply as an authoritarian regime suppressing culture by virtue of suppressing the forces of democratic values), is not, this thesis maintains, a position able to facilitate a critical understanding of the complexity and essential historicity of China's Communism. This thesis tends to the internal complexities of the relation between state, policy and society, which entails an imperative that 'culture' in China can only be referred to in terms of specific institutional interrelations between society and economy. Established academic approaches to the study of culture in China are often 'critical', but tend on the whole to be critical in a philosophical sense (as a classical rationalist liberalism, which appeals to a broad Western consensus on normative democratic values of liberty, rights and representation). While this thesis does not oppose classical rationalist liberalism as such, it offers a principled alternative by asserting that

a critical evaluation of the efficacy of the Communist Party's agendas concerning culture must be understood historically. For they not only pertain to a different set of normative values (as communist and socialist values, not entirely foreign to Western liberal traditions of political thought), but these values are mediated by a complex and historically evolving political economy heavily invested in a national development project. Furthermore, the alternative, critical-historical approach of this thesis is able to identify potential avenues by which China's communist society can politically evolve (not simply adopt or replicate Western liberal values). While there are strong philosophical traditions in the West that assert with credibility that the normative democratic values of liberty, rights and representation are 'universal', the institutional mediation and policy mechanisms that facilitate those values are, of course, more specific and pertain to the institutional traditions and configurations of particular countries or regions. This thesis has asserted a research interest in the institutional mediation and policy mechanisms that facilitate China's values, and affirming some of the values demands a critical stance on their institutional mediation and policy mechanisms.

At the same time, scholars whose research largely functions 'affirmatively' in supporting the economic development of China's culture and creative realms, may see this as a de facto force of liberalisation (thus providing some material conditions for democratic progress), but they are similarly confronted by a political reality on which they have little influence for change. In fact, many cultural economists who may regard themselves as Left-leaning tacitly subscribe to the now discredited assumption (promoted most famously by Francis Fukuyama, 1992) that in a largely post-industrial global economy, capitalist competitive free market practices are not only necessary for economic survival, they facilitate the rise of civil society, individual interest and innovation,

which in turn are powerful conditions for liberalisation and democracy. Research concerned with the development of the cultural industries primarily as an economic sector (contributing to GDP growth, employment and industrial development), while essentially corresponding with key political aims of the Chinese Government, have little to say about the interface between China's market capitalism in practice and the historical-ideological and developmental agendas by which the Chinese government is making policy. In general, economists too often view 'culture' in China as (only) a 'background' or 'context', and consequently they do not cognise the extent to which the Chinese Central government takes seriously the non-economic and non-instrumental dimensions of culture. Culture is a frequent topic in most central Government published statements, reports and key Government speeches, aside from its role in the economy. As Chapters Five and Six of this thesis will show, when the cultural industries' pursuit of economic profits run against the Party's ideological agendas, the propaganda system does not hesitate to impose censorship and restrictive policies even incurring huge financial losses.

The above cited categories of research have played a role in the conception of this thesis and the formation of its aims. This thesis attempts to move between 'the critical' and 'the practical' while being both critical (cognisant of the role of ideology and political domination in the formation of social institutions and cultural realm generally) and practical (cognisant of the policymaking and policy discourse that determines the political management of, and consequently, cultural management of the cultural realm). In order to formulate the kind of research agenda that truly can play a role in constructive change and cultural policymaking, this thesis is grounded on the premise that research that is both critical and practical should encompass the CPC's historical-ideological formation of a 'socialist culture' as internal to China's national development (its

political economy) as well as the shape and process of cultural production itself.

2.2 Culture for development – the UNESCO's framework

The relationship between culture and development is an historic policy concern of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), recently contextualised in the new global imperative of sustainability and sustainable development. UNESCO's Constitution (1946) and UN mandate take a broad concept of culture, allowing for an ethical emphasis on social life and community development (now incorporating the 'Human Development' framework of UNDP), cultural diversity (democracy and cultural pluralism), and culture as an expression of individual Human Rights. According to the pivotal Mexico City Declaration (1982), it is 'culture' only that has the facility to refer public policy makers to 'the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or a social group'. For culture 'includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs' (UNESCO, 1982: 41).

Since the 1980s, UNESCO has openly 'framed' its support of cultural policy research and models of policymaking in terms of development, democracy and rights (in accordance with all other mainstream UN agencies). It promotes a conception of culture as 'driver' and the 'enabler' of sustainable development, and where sustainability is an ethical imperative equal to democracy (and diversity) and Human Rights. Further, sustainability has expanded as a policy concept (beyond its initial ecological and environmental formulations of the Agenda 21 or Rio Earth Summit declaration). It now involves all social, aesthetic, urban and infrastructural elements (industry, services, welfare, and so on), becoming intimately interconnected with 'cultural' life and activities. For culture

and creative industries globally, UNESCO's prime achievement is *The 2005 UN Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (the principal UN-level cultural policy, which has the status of an international legal instrument or 'international law'); its principles are echoed in the *2013 Hangzhou Declaration: Placing Culture at the Heart of Sustainable Development Policies*, which, as only a declaration, has no international legal authority, but here signifies an articulation of global cultural policy supported by the Chinese Government. The 2005 Convention requires that '[t]he diversity of cultural expressions must be taken into account in the development process because it contributes to the strengthening of identity and social cohesion and to the building of inclusive societies' (UNESCO, 2013a, Article 13. 4), and to 'realise the full potential and contribution of cultural industries to sustainable development, economic growth and the promotion of decent quality of life' (Article 13. 6). Similarly, the Hangzhou Declaration states that culture makes specific contributions to 'inclusive social, cultural and economic development, harmony, environmental sustainability, peace, and security' (UNESCO, 2013b). On both accounts, culture is 'framed' as a development resource (i.e., culture as a driver, and so on), and where its contribution to economic and social development affords a certain cohesion or holistic understanding of a place or people (cf. UNESCO, 2015: 52-77).

Since the 2005 UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the concept of 'diversity' has become a central vehicle of UNESCO's project in embedding development, democracy, rights and sustainability in the cultural policymaking of member states (Nielsen, 2011). Building on its prescription of culture as 'whole ways of life' that encompasses not only the arts and cultural sector but also beliefs, values, norms, identities and lifestyles, UNESCO stresses that the protection and promotion of cultural diversity is a fulcrum for the advancement

of development, democracy, rights and sustainability, and crucially, take cultural policy from its Western investment in institutions, fine art traditions, and the educated social classes, and interject policies for culture in society and economy (the social fabric of everyday life, and economic sphere of labour, enterprise and industry). At the same time, the promotion of varied cultures and ways of lives is a means of identity, recognition and participation of minority groups within a society (key to harmonious and inclusive interaction among different cultures and communities (UNESCO, 2015: 51-60). Furthermore, cultural diversity is maintained by UNESCO as a corollary of biodiversity, and so as an essential reproductive force for human creativity and innovation, where different cultures can generate various and equally valuable or useful knowledge and practices in dealing with pressing problems of national and global development. For example, particular emphasis has been given to the protection and promotion of traditional and indigenous cultures as they are presumed to foster environmental-friendly and community-oriented lifestyles in today's world dominated by the one-dimensional and free-markets-based 'neoliberal project' that models on Western institutions (UNESCO, 1995: 78-79; Nakashima, 2010).

In UNESCO's framework, therefore, culture affords policymakers access to particular local context and participation of local citizens in the development of their living environment and immediate social or economic infrastructure. According to the 2005 Convention, 'cultural diversity creates a rich and varied world, which increases the range of choices and nurtures human capacities and values, and therefore is a mainspring for sustainable development for communities, peoples and nations' (Preamble. Recital 3), and that 'the protection, promotion, and maintenance of cultural diversity are an essential requirement for sustainable development for the benefit of present and future

generations' (Article 2. 6). Directly connecting culture and cultural diversity with human choices, capacities, values and benefits, UNESCO emphasises the significance for any developmental process to be correspondent with specific local cultures, the particularities of a place and community, and to attach importance to human-centred developmental strategies (UNESCO, 2015: 17). These emphases are made more explicitly in the Hangzhou Declaration, which highlights that 'we recognize that one size does not fit all and that different cultural perspectives will result in different paths to development', and that 'development is shaped by culture and local context, which ultimately also determine its outcomes' (UNESCO, 2013). Although culture as an 'enabler' of development has been somehow overshadowed in UNESCO's framework by culture's role as a 'driver' that benefits other dimensions of development (UNESCO, 2015: 50), for some scholars the former offers a much more profound understanding of the relations between culture and development (Dessein et al., 2015: 31-32; O'Connor, 2016). Instead of perceiving culture as an independent dimension that contributes to other 'non-cultural' spheres of development, it recognises that both the means and ends of development itself are 'culturalised'. For development is always an outcome of human activities, and people's minds and actions are shaped by their diversified cultures which are in turn deeply embedded in people's everyday lives, a 'naturalised' developmental process should be resultant from human acts when people change and create their environments in their unique ways. Because local people, communities and institutions are familiar with their context and people's needs, local-based development strategies and plans are also more likely to succeed in meeting people's conditions, values, and aspirations than a universal developmental strategy which ignores regional peculiarities (UNESCO, 2013b). In this sense, there are diversified types of developments, which embed in people's diversified cultures and ways of lives (UNESCO, 2001:

13). Second, because different communities and societies have different values, needs, ambitions and identities, a truly democratic and human-centred development should cultivate people's diversified cultures, fulfil their various needs and choices that they have reason to value (UNESCO and UNDP, 2013: 17).

The Chinese Government has been a significant supporter of UNESCO's agenda in protecting and promoting cultural diversity. It is not only the first nation to cite the 2005 Convention in order to defend its regulations on the imports of cultural goods in international trade conflicts (Garner, 2016: 120), China also financed and co-organised (along with UNESCO) the international congress that produced the Hangzhou Declaration, which advocates the placing of culture at the heart of development policies. The national leaders of China have expressed on multiple occasions concerning the close connections between Chinese culture and China's own developmental path (e.g., Hu, 2006; Li, 2017a). President Xi Jinping, in his keynote speech at the UNESCO headquarters, highlighted three points concerning cultural and global development. First, he emphasised that 'civilizations have come in different colors' (Xi, 2014a, paragraph 10), and 'a single flower does not make spring' (paragraph 11). The Chinese culture, just like all other cultures, supports national development and represents the achievement of humanity. Second, he stressed that all cultures and civilisations are equal and should be treated equally. Third, Xi Jinping expressed the view that there should be inclusive interaction and communication between different cultures, and the mechanic imitation of one single civilisation could only be detrimental for the world development.

Xi Jinping's remarks concerning the significance of cultural diversity for

development, needless to say, is largely driven by the Chinese Government's determination to prevent 'peaceful evolution' – a strategy perceived by the Communist leaders as being adopted by the West in order to undermine socialist culture, political and social institutions in China (Ong, 2007: 718). As I have mentioned in Section One, in the media and cultural sectors, the suppression of Western values and institutional arrangements have been widely documented as a key focus of the Chinese authority. It has also been argued that China utilises UNESCO's framework (particularly the 2005 Convention) as a tool in order to gain strategic advantage in the global market of cultural goods and services (Garner, 2015). However, in the English scholarship, little attention has been paid to the deeper, more profound connection between culture and China's national development as perceived by political elites from Beijing, and the common ground between the Chinese Government's plans for culture and the UNESCO's framework.

The relationship between the Chinese Government's cultural policy and China's national development cannot be characterised in terms of a neoliberal approach, which regards government's management of culture as less desirable than the marketplace (or, culture's roles in development as only legitimised by 'scientific' or economic-based evidence in public policy makings (Gray, 2006; 2007; Belfiore, 2012)). Nor is China's cultural policy built upon the key Western democratic principle that the government should be prevented from exerting direct influence over culture and arts (particularly content production) in order to be accountable to the public (Quinn, 1997: 127-128). Rather, China's cultural policy is deeply embedded in the reality of China's political economy and the CPC's histories of cultural management. In order to understand the Chinese Government's intent of cultural management, attention should be given to research conducted concerning China's own mode of development, the Party's

theories, leaders' speeches and scholarly works (particularly those published in the Party's key theoretical journals) on the significance of cultural policy to China's political economy.

2.3 Cultural policy and China's political economy

The Chinese Government's understanding of culture and national development is based on the fundamental assumption that culture reflects social and economic reality but also greatly influences the political and economic development of a society (Pan, 2002; Yao, 2014). This understanding is largely built upon Marx's theory of historical materialism and the CPC's own revolutionary experience under China's specific national conditions. First, Karl Marx argued the truism that humans create the world, with the scientific consequence that world history can only be fully understood (in systematic, developmental, terms) as the historical evolution of the material conditions of human production through labour. The working class, which constitute the vast majority of population in an industrial capitalist society, are the 'creators' or central agents of history insofar as they generate the material productivity of society and are the fundamental agency through which the necessary birth of socialist society out of the crisis and eventual failure of three kind of social order required for capitalism, or capital accumulation (Tucker, 1961: 131; Callinicos, 2012: 99).

For the CPC, the power of the people (mainly peasants and workers) in creating history and in generating productivity was well 'proved' by its own revolutionary experience during which the Party integrated with the masses in fighting against their 'common enemies' and in building the People's Republic of China. Second, as Chapter Three will discuss in detail, the 'proletarian revolution' took place in China under the social realities that were dramatically different from Europe

where Marxism was originally developed. In order to create a revolutionary consciousness among the Chinese people, the leaders of the CPC 'discovered' the crucial importance of culture and ideology in transforming the economic and political base of the society. The key principle of the Party's ideological indoctrination and mobilisation is the utilisation of people's own cultures, consciousness and ways of life in educating the masses and supplementing the communist ideology of the Party. The Communist Party, which consists of a selection of masses that lead the whole, must consistently represent and guide the masses in the ideological field.

The Communist leaders' firm belief in the power of the people in both economic development and cultural/ideological construction gave rise to the 'mass line' (群众路线), which is a fundamental leadership method of the CPC. The slogan developed by Mao Zedong for the mass line is 'from the masses, to the masses', which stipulates that the Party 'must rely on the masses for its strength, serve the needs of the masses, draw its inspiration from them, and gear its political ideology and organisational tactics to their responsiveness' (Steiner, 1951: 423). The mass line is based on three fundamental doctrines developed by China's revolutionary leaders. First, in their everyday social practice, the masses generate valuable ideas, wisdom, and innovation. Political leaders, therefore, should consistently learn from the masses, promote their ideas and practices in advancing socialism. Second, the vanguard party needs to constantly gather and summarise valuable ideas and activities from the masses, and develop policies, strategies, and theories based on a firm understanding of the living condition of the masses and comprehensive analysis of the social situation. Third, party leader should return the summarised and 'enhanced' ideas and practices (in a scientific and systematic manner) back to the masses in the form of policies, disciplines or propaganda, and implement them through tests and

experiments to prevent errors (Mao, 1991).

When premier Deng Xiaoping initiated China's economic reform in the Post-Mao era in the late 1970s, he was determined that the planned economy and class struggles had become the major hindrance to China's modernisation. However, how the socialist market economy should be constructed was a question that deeply baffled China's reformists (Zhao, 2009). Deng Xiaoping therefore largely based China's economic construction on the economic practices of Chinese people. By implementing the key principle of 'liberating the mind and seeking truth from facts', Deng Xiaoping gave a great emphasis on Chinese people's practice, culture, and creativity in 'creating the history' of a modern and prosperous society that benefit the interests of the masses (Shao, 1995). The Central government, in turn, take on the important role of coordinating, summarising and formalising successful and widespread economic arrangements based on experiments at sub-national levels (Corne, 2002:382; Heilmann, 2008: 3; Xu, 2011: 1091; see also Chapter Three).

Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic attitude towards national development, and central Government's relaxation of ideological control during the initial stage of the reform era, however, soon disintegrated the CPC's leading position in the cultural and ideological field. Although Chinese local culture and practice under regional economic experimentation have contributed significantly to China's 'mode' of development, people's pursuit for economic interests also gives rise to widespread social conflicts in a nation that lacks formal laws and regulations. Worse still, for the political leaders, the introduction and circulation of Western democratic values and ideals in the Chinese society led to the Tiananmen demonstrations which directly challenged the CPC's one-party rulership.

Since the 1990s, the management and promotion of culture and ideology are strategic concerns that are integrated by policy makers into the realities and visions of China's economic and political development. Socialist ideological construction has been elevated by the three generations of Chinese leaders into a top political priority in combating the negative economic and social effects of commercialisation, and in consolidating the CPC's legitimacy.

2.3.1 Cultural diversity and China's 'mode' of economic development

China's apparent and much studied economic transition from a planned economy to a market-oriented economy is a complex process, which many studies wrongly assume to involve political values and fundamental beliefs (i.e. capitalist not communist). Within merely four decades, China has indeed been transformed from one of the poorest countries globally to the second economic power in the world, and the behaviours, everyday cultural habits, individual aspirations, financial liquidity and household income, have indeed been transformed. According to statistics provided by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, China's gross domestic product (GDP) has soared from RMB 367.9 billion yuan (1978) to over 82.7 trillion yuan (2017), with an average annual growth rate of 9.5% (Xinhuanet, 2018). Since the 1990s, there has been a great number of studies conducted by social scientists both in China and overseas that aim to explore and unravel the 'mysteries' of this, China's apparent 'economic miracle' (e.g., Lin, Cai and Li, 2003; Hu, 2007b; Tsai, 2007; Nee and Oppen, 2012; Wang, 2013; Teets and Hurst, 2014; Yu, 2017). A well-established fact is that China's development is not based upon any preexisting economic 'models'. In sharp contrast to the radical 'structural adjustments' that have taken place in innumerable developing nations under the demand of the America-led West, facilitated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (Rotee, 1995; McMichael, 2000; Peet, 2009), China's economic

transition has been a much longer gradual and historically continuous process, and which was concerned to balance innovation and flexibility (see Chapter Three). Governmental decentralisation and local autonomy are now widely recognised as the key to the creativity and adaptability of China's economic system. Sebastian Heilmann, a specialist in China's economic and political strategies, describes the country's economic system as 'experimentation under hierarchy'. He believes that through devolving responsibility for development to sub-national governments and declared 'autonomous' economic zones, China's reform was able to exploit bottom-up innovations, local knowledge and industrial experiments, all managed to bring about coherent and widespread transformative changes, all despite a rigid authoritarian political environment (Heilmann, 2008). Similarly, Xu Chenggang, currently an economics professor at Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business, argues that local experimentation and regional competition resulting from economic decentralisation have been the fundamental driving forces of China's national development. He finds that 'almost all successful reforms in the past three decades were introduced through local experiments' (Xu, 2011: 1082), and that diversified local innovations are the key to the nation's economic success.

Because China's economic transformation in the post-Mao era has not been based upon a priori rules or existing development models, the Chinese central Government has been unwilling to provide fundamental developmental rules that would constrict the nation's prevalent economic experiments (China has been observed as being generally weak in economic laws and regulations (Clark, Murrell and Whiting, 2008: 420; Xu, 2011: 4; Wang, 2013; Blasek, 2015)). The CPC is arguably no longer able (compared with the 'communist China' under Mao's leadership) to propagate a fully functional national ideology. Under Mao, for example, 'socialist culture' was defined explicitly in ways that cohered

with an equally explicit economic theory of national development (which made it a robust Communist state). Currently, this thesis observes, the culture of the people in China (local norms, values, customs, and moral codes) can no longer be assumed to exist in seamless harmony with either Central government ideology (where the phrase 'socialist values' can be seen advertised around every city), or the Party-State managed political economy. This raises a theoretical question for this thesis – given how 'everyday life' in China is motivated and animated by local norms, values, customs, and moral codes, how can we define, in both empirical and theoretical terms, the shift in China's culture? How do we then articulate the emerging tension between the assumptions of government public policies for culture, and the everyday cultural life of Chinese citizens? It has been widely observed by scholars (both in China and overseas) that China's development has been largely shaped by local cultures and its many traditional ways of life, which not only give rise to a large number of 'development modes' of local economies across the nation, but is also object and contributor to central Government's development strategies (Peng, 2004; Chen, 2007a; Hu, 2007b; Tsai, 2007; Nee and Opper, 2012; Bian, 2013; Keith, Lash, Arnosti and Rooker, 2014; see also the concluding Chapter of this thesis).

The ruling elites perceive Chinese citizens as the fundamental 'creators', 'writers' and 'witnesses' of China's history (Xi, 2014b, paragraph 27). People's values, ideas, and ways of life, accordingly, have been recognised by central Party leaders as having played contributory roles to China's own 'development model'. Deng Xiaoping, for example, when commenting on China's economic experience, emphasised that "a great many of things in the economic reform have been brought up by the masses through practice... It [China's economic reform] is people's wisdom and collective wisdom" (cited in Hu, 2013, paragraph

9). According to President Xi Jinping, “In the process of reform of opening-up, every breakthrough in [our] knowledge and practice, the emergence and development of all new things, the creation and accumulation in every field all originated from hundreds of millions of people's wisdom and practice” (Xi, 2014c: 68). When Xi Jinping served as the Secretary of Zhejiang provincial Party Committee, he published an article titled ‘Construct a Harmonious Society Which Respects Cultural Diversity’ in *the People's Daily* (人民日报 – the official mouthpiece of China's central Government), in which he emphasised the crucial importance of regional culture to Zhejiang's development. According to him: “The achievements made by Zhejiang during the 20 years of reform cannot be separated from Zhejiang's culture as the prime power (源动力). It is the organic integration of Zhejiang's profound culture with its current development that supports people's entrepreneurial spirit and innovation mechanism” (Xi, 2005, paragraph 3). In recent years, the importance of local cultural diversity to regional development seems to be expressed increasingly frequently by central Government.

The CPC's long-standing perception of the masses as the fundamental force of national socialist construction, and the post-Mao developmental reality which is largely shaped by people's active transformation and creation of their living environments constitute major reasons why China's cultural policy places a central focus on the depiction of people's culture, creativity and practice. As stipulated by the *Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's Opinions on the Prosperity and Development of Socialist Literature and Art* – a guiding document of China's cultural policy issued in 2015, that cultural works must ‘vividly portray the great process of people's creation of history’ (the CPC Central Committee, 2015, paragraph 5), and ‘fully respect the principal position and pioneering capacity of the people in order to unleash the creative capacity

of the masses' (paragraph 8). The Party leaders' recognition of the importance of culture and practice (particularly Chinese people's values, ways of life and creativity) for China's diversified and regionalised developmental realities determines that 'cultural pluralism' (in UNESCO's terms) should be officially acknowledged (Xia et al., 2003: 11-12). In former President Jiang Zemin's report at the 16th National Congress of the CPC, 'highlighting the keynote and advocating diversity' ('弘扬主旋律, 提倡多样化') was officially put forward as a key principle of China's cultural policy. Emphasising the importance of cultural and artistic works in depicting people's culture and ways of life, Jiang Zemin said,

We should highlight the keynote and advocate cultural diversity. In particular, [we should] encourage and promote works that reflect contemporary scenes of the construction of socialist modernisation...[We] hope that the great majority of national artists will actively devote themselves to people's lives in the reform, opening-up and modernisation construction. [They should] acquaint themselves with life, understand people, accumulate materials and stimulate inspiration in order to create works for the masses that appeal to both refined and popular tastes (quoted in Wu, 2012a, paragraph 6).

2.3.2 Culture for a sustainable and harmonious development

As the only dominant power in Chinese politics, the Communist Party must consistently maintain its position as the vanguard of China's socialist cause – the credibility of the historical ideas, claims and socialist philosophy (of equality, redistribution, comradeship, and so on) is, as noted, no longer to be assumed. Because Party leaders recognise culture as having crucial roles to play in the nation's economic development, policymakers have been continuously defining its position as the representative of 'advanced culture' in order to lead and

'correct' China's developmental reality. As noted by Xia et al. (2003: 11), for the political leaders in China, cultural and ideological management should 'create a healthy social and cultural environment for economic development', 'establish healthy social ethics and psychological quality' among Chinese people. As Chapter Three will explain in detail, the CPC's official ideology that has been constructed by central Government in today's China consists of several major elements – patriotism/nationalism, moral values, positive propaganda and the 'mass line of culture'. These components of socialist culture have been strenuously promoted by policymakers as the 'keynote' of China's cultural sector.

Morality is a primary focus of the Party's construction of socialist culture in recent fifteen years. Under the influence of Confucianism, moral authority has been regarded by China's political leaders as a major source of political power (Klimes, 2017: 131-132). In today's China, moral codes are also used to address some of the key challenges of national development. Under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping's leadership, problems such as increasing income inequality and discrepancy, social injustice, rampant corruption, and environmental degradation, are now all recognised as the central pitfalls of China's socialist project (Hu, 2005; Xi, 2018). In order to address such problems, Hu Jintao raised the concepts of 'harmonious society' and 'scientific development'³ with the purpose of leading the country towards a more sustainable way of development. Xi Jinping further defined the 'primary contradiction' (主要矛盾) of Chinese society as 'the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life' in such aspects as equality, justice, security, and environment (Xi, 2017a, paragraph

³ The 16th CPC National Congress defined the aim of the 'scientific development concept' as 'adherence to a people-centred, comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable development so as to bring about an all-round progress of economy, society and humans' (The Central Committee of the CPC, 2003, cited in Yang, 2004, p. 13).

22). In the ruling elite's vision for an ordered society and sustainable national development, the construction of morality plays a crucial role. As Hu Jintao declared, 'whether or not a society is harmonious, whether a nation can achieve long-term order to a great extent depend on the ideological and moral characters of all social members... We must actively carry out the project of citizens' moral construction, widely promote the education of social morality, professional ethics and family virtues...' (Hu, 2005, paragraph 20). Since 2005, a series of moral campaigns, such as 'Socialist Concept of Honors and Disgrace' (社会主义荣辱观), 'Four Virtues Education' (四德教育), and 'Socialist Core Values' (社会主义核心价值观) have been strenuously carried out by the Party-State as key national strategies. In the 18th National Congress of the CPC held in 2012, 'rule of virtue' (以德治国) was formally enshrined into the Party's charter as a critical means of governance.

By promoting a set of moral values such as honesty, friendship, equality, justice, and trustworthiness in Chinese society, the ruling elite aim to achieve ordered and progressive development based on people's harmonious and unified co-existence. The Party leaders have recognised the close relationship between morality and China's economic system since the advent of the reform era (Deng, 2001: 144). In recent years, the decline of morality among Chinese people has increasingly been perceived by the ruling elite as a significant detriment to the nation's economic development. As emphasised by Zhang Yong and Hu Fuming, two former high-ranking officials in their article published in the *Red Flag* (a core theoretical political journal of the CPC), moral decline has become one of the biggest challenges of China's economic development. According to them, a sustainable economic system, which requires trust, credibility, honesty and efficiency, depends on the construction of socialist culture that sustains common values, moral standards and norms. 'Without the participation of

Chinese people in the cultural domain, a sole reliance on economic demands will inevitably lead to unsolvable pitfalls in economic and social development' (Zhang and Hu, 2017: 7). At the 12th National People's Congress held in 2016, Prime Minister Li Keqiang emphasised that the socialist market economy should not only be governed by law but also be governed by morality. According to him, "there are many critical problems in today's economic sphere, such as swindles, forged and fake commodities, and a lack of credibility. They could be located and treated from the perspective of culture" (Li, 2016, paragraph 3).

2.3.3 Culture and political legitimacy

The CPC does not only construct an official ideology in order to achieve objective economic and social developmental aims, importantly, for the ruling elite, it has also maintained the management of culture and ideology as a priority of the Government's political agenda (and internal to the order and maintenance of the Party's legitimacy, from within and without). The Communist Party's leadership, claimed by the 19th National Congress of the CPC, is 'the most intrinsic feature' and 'the biggest advantage' of socialism with Chinese characteristic (Xi, 2017, paragraph 27).

As a political organisation which gained its ruling position through ideological struggles, the CPC evidently understands the formation of ideology as one of its core political agendas. For the ruling elites in the post-Mao China, some of the major blows to the very survival of communism and socialism (such as the Cultural Revolution, the 1989 student demonstration, and the collapse of the Soviet Union) were directly linked to the loss of credibility (and thus control) in the ideological domain. As President Xi Jinping's remarks in the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work: "ideological construction is an extremely important undertaking... [We must] firmly grasp the leadership,

management and discourse power in ideological work, without a moment of relaxation. Otherwise [we] will make irredeemable historical mistakes” (quoted in An, 2015, paragraph 2, 7). He urges propaganda officers to “take warnings from previous examples” (paragraph 2), and emphasises whether or not the masses will internalise the socialist ideology determines the “future and destiny” of the Party, Chinese people's attitudes and perceptions of the entire socialist cause (paragraph 1).

Articles published on the Party's core theoretical journals such as *Qiushi* tend to connect the CPC's ‘ideological construction’ work with the Party's legitimacy, China's social order and stability, people's cohesion and solidarity (Ai, 2016; Zhang, 2016; Fu, 2017a). A sturdy and attractive official ideology is considered as not only necessary for resisting ‘disruptive’ foreign values and ideas, but also for transforming those moral standards, ideas and values that are beneficial to the ruling elites into the ‘mainstream culture’ of Chinese society, so the general public would voluntarily follow the Party's leadership and support its rulership (Wang, 2016: 4). The particularly urgent task of the Party's ideological work is to attract and unify Chinese people against the corrosive effects of commercialisation on people's morality (despite commerce and retail markets being a central component of the Government domestic economic policy). As pointed out by Han Yongjin, a scholar and a former high-ranking propaganda officer, one major ‘superiority’ of the socialism over capitalism is the former's agenda to reduce human greed, moral corruption, and economic exploitation. After decades of economic reform, however, such ‘pitfalls of capitalism’ are becoming increasingly entrenched in Chinese society. ‘Socialist culture’, on the other hand, points out the correct direction of China's socialist course – China should not only achieve economic prosperity and modernisation, but also construct ‘advanced culture’ and moral citizens who are not primarily motivated

by self-interest, but by their devotion to moral principles, the society, the nation and socialism (Han, 2012: 109-110).

2.4 Chinese culture and people's way of life – the foundation of the CPC's cultural policy

The previous discussion has shown Central government's management of culture has at least three important and interconnected aims. Firstly, China's cultural policy suppresses those values, thoughts, and information (such as Western democratic values, and 'excessive' expressions of commercial culture) that are considered by policymakers to be undesirable and even threatening to the Party and/or to the Chinese society. Secondly, the Communist Party has been strenuously forming its official ideologies across the social and economic domains and for strategic political purposes. A powerful and attractive official ideology, which maintains a credibility and usefulness in ordering social and working life in every area, is not only necessary for resisting 'disruptive' foreign values and ideas but also for the unification of Chinese people under the Communist Party's leadership. Thirdly, the CPC actively constructs and promotes 'socialist culture' and its ideologies in order to reach factual developmental aims. For the Chinese Government, culture must play essential roles in both economic and political construction.

China's cultural policy, therefore, contains multiple agendas that are responsive to China's developmental reality and conducive to socialist aspirations of sustainable development. It is invested in, and emerging from, the historical and evolving project of China's national development, and the social and political theories animating policy frameworks and aims. In recent years, with the rise of China as a dominant global power, the Party leaders have ambitiously entered the global arena, and sought to promote China's developmental path, values,

and visions as viable alternatives to the Western-centered narrative of modernisation. China's historical legacies, cultural traditions (particularly neo-Confucianism) and contemporary achievements are integrated into various international projects such as The Belt and Road Initiative, Confucius Institute, and the notion of a harmonious 'community of shared future for mankind'⁴. As argued by Mayer (2018), under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping's leaderships, political leaders have been constructing an ideological continuity between China's past and present, and using historical legacies and current practice to legitimise and theorise China's mode of development.

Crucial to the legitimisation of China's socialist path is the application of 'socialist theories' that explain and guide the nation's modernisation. Xi Jinping has emphasised on multiple occasions concerning the importance of developing philosophy and social science that are rooted in and contribute to China's national development. He places particular emphasis on Marxist-Maoist theories, traditional philosophy, and contemporary Chinese people's activities at the grassroots level (Xi, 2016; 2019). He urges scholars to "construct a disciplinary system with Chinese characteristics and universal relevance" (Xi, 2016, paragraph 1).

The mass line has been a fundamental principle of the CPC since the revolutionary period. The implementation of this leadership method in the arena of culture determines whether Chinese culture, people's ideas and practice in socialist construction can be adequately protected and promoted, and whether the vanguard Party is able to collect, unify and influence people's identities and

⁴ The 'community of shared future for mankind' (人类命运共同体) is a concept put forward by former President Hu Jintao and advocated by Xi Jinping. It has been promoted as a global governance solution to the consequences and challenges of economic globalization. The concept includes various aspects of global governance. It aims to build an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world with lasting peace, universal security and common prosperity (Song & Ruan, 2018).

values through ideological construction. In addition, China's traditional culture, which has emerged from five thousand years of history, are practiced and animated by current Chinese citizens. The protection and promotion of 'Chinese culture' and Chinese people's way of life, therefore, is central to China's cultural policy (see the next Chapter for a detailed discussion). In the CPC's official discourse, the 'masses' (群众), the 'people' (人民), and 'ordinary people' (老百姓) are often used interchangeably. As Ernesto Laclau accurately described, Mao Zedong understood that the 'Chinese people' is a diverse and complex aggregate (Mao famously wrote about 'the contradictions within the people'), but he used this 'symbolic framework' as a 'popular surface' that transcends internal ruptures in order to unite the masses against their 'common enemies' (Japanese invaders, landlords, the bourgeoisie, etc.) (Laclau, 2005: 122). In the post-Mao China, in spite of the official renunciation of class stratification, the 'people' (or 'ordinary people') continues to be utilised by political leaders as a symbolic term that encompasses the great majority of Chinese citizens who are outside of the elite class or the bureaucratic system. Based on the critical Marxist principle that the masses are the central agents of social development, policymakers consistently demand the cultural sector to focus on the depiction of ordinary people's ideas, values and ways of life.

2.5 Approaching culture and development historically – an emerging trend of intellectual enquiry in China

In his research article "Engaging with History", British scholar Mike Pickering emphasised the crucial importance of integrating historical awareness into cultural research. He believed that a historical perspective enables researchers to treat culture, ideology and institutions as products of historical processes, and therefore to better understand current social forms and practices. An engagement with history also helps to situate people's (such as ordinary

citizens and cultural practitioners) activities within social contexts, and to perceive such activities as being interwoven with broad cultural and political change. Pickering argued that past histories contain great values in facilitating debates and reflections about today's cultural issues. A dismissal of history in cultural research, on the other hand, tends to consolidate the 'naturalness' and dominance of current structures of power (Pickering, 2008).

For both political leaders and intellectuals in China, the nation's past history is an important source of power in counteracting the global hegemony of capitalist modernisation. Professor Xu Jilin, an eminent historian from East China University, observed that there is an ascending trend of 'historicism' (历史主义) among Chinese scholars. In contrast to the prevailing view in China during the 1980s and early 1990s which perceived the West as the universal and ahistorical model of modernity, these scholars are critical of the notion that China will face an irreversible incorporation into the global capitalist system and liberal democracy, or the replacement of Chinese culture by Western 'universal values'. They believe that China is able to provide an alternative paradigm of development, and such a paradigm must be based upon the nation's historical legacies (Xu, 2010). Wang Hui, perhaps the best-known figure of China's 'new left', has been an adamant opponent of the Eurocentric assumptions of social development (Wang, 2008a; 2009). He believes that China's historical experience should be regarded as a source of innovation for contemporary theories and institutions. A central argument of his is that in spite of the great transformation taken by Deng Xiaoping, China's pre-1978 traditions (such as the emphasis on social practice and experiments, the mass-line, mass-mobilisation and agrarian reforms) significantly contribute to the nation's economic success in the post-Mao era (Wang, 2010a; 2011). The idea that China's economic reform should not be severed from its past legacies

(particularly the nation's traditional culture and the Party's revolutionary theories) are shared by many other scholars in China (e.g., Pan, 2009; Li & Li, 2010; Wu, 2010).

In recent years, approaching national development policies from a cultural and historical perspective has become a new form of enquiry that attracts scholarly attention (Liu, 2018: 27). Professor Li Ming from Anhui University, for example, argued that China's socialist project depends on whether people would internalise those values, norms and moral standards that are conducive to a scientific and sustainable way of development. He traced the formation and development of China's socialist cultural theories and emphasized that the 'fundamental feature' of China's culture policy is its focus on the mass-line and the CPC's ideological leadership (Li, 2018: 97-99). In order to construct a socialist culture that fosters sustainable development, the Party needs to cultivate cultural diversity, promote mass culture, and effectively guide people's lifestyles against the corrosive effects of consumerism (Li, 2018). Liu, Chen and Zhang (2012) asserted that culture lies at the very core of UNESCO's sustainable development agendas because environmental preservation ultimately depends on people's recognition and internalisation of 'environmentally-friendly' values. They provided an extensive examination of such values in China's traditional culture (particularly Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism) as well as in political theories put forward by communist leaders. Their central argument is that such 'advanced' cultural values should be valorised in Chinese society (particularly by the Central Government) in order to achieve a sustainable mode of development. Professor Hu Huijin From Shanghai Jiaotong University argued that the key to cultural policy lies in its ability to provide a 'spiritual and cultural system' that supports sustainable development. He criticised the crass commercialisation of 'creative clusters',

zones and cultural tourism in China, and appealed for more political attention being paid to the protection and cultivation of regional histories and ways of life. The development of creative industries, according to him, should be based on the natural existence of people's spiritual and material life (Hu, 2015).

This thesis is inspired by the historical perspective taken by both the Chinese Government and intellectuals on the relations between culture and national development. Initially, the following research draws heavily on Chinese leaders' speeches, central Government policy documents, the CPC's major academic journals, and Chinese research articles. Scholarly works published in China, however, when focusing on central Government's activities in the field of culture, tend to dwell on reiterating and explaining leaders' utterances, and on stressing and analysing the 'correctness' of Government policies. This is less useful to the aims of this research. They often approach the Government's management of culture from what Adorno would call an 'affirmative' or wholly positive perspective. Although it is widely acknowledged by Chinese scholars that the construction of 'socialist culture' faces difficulties. These include, for example, the lack of credibility in Government propaganda, or the people's evident loss of devotion to socialism, the decline of morality and the spread of 'harmful' values (financial acquisitiveness, consumerism, hedonism, individualism, and so on), and where the CPC's activities in the field of culture have been regarded as the 'cure' for such problems. For obvious political reasons, Chinese scholarship rarely examined in depth the Party's control of China's cultural system (along with its implications), or the historical pitfalls of the Party leaders' ideological demands on the cultural realm. In their attempts to explore the value of Chinese culture and traditional legacies, these works may be valuable in rejecting Western-centred development model, but they are less effective in challenging the current power structure in China or facilitating policy changes.

Without a *critical* examination of past histories and their current representations, as Mike Pickering described, “the ‘now’ becomes regnant... it ceases to command any viable resources for temporal reflexivity and is condemned to repeat the past” (Pickering, 2008: 194).

2.6 The approach of this thesis

In its policy ‘mainstreaming’ of cultural diversity, UNESCO challenges past Western models of development as colonialist, market-centred and capitalist. The Government of China shared its opposition to the imposition of one hegemonic developmental model, and its assumption that ‘culture’ is a central means of sustainable development. In addition, the Chinese Government firmly believes that values and morality play a significant role in the formation and strengthening of people's minds and actions in a contemporary society heavily weighed towards patterns of behaviour defined by commerce and consumption. Selectively revising ancient Confucianism, so embedded in Asia regionally, a preoccupation with moral cultivation and individual responsibility towards community, is integrated with policies for the ‘superstructural’ level of macro-economics and national politics in ways ordinary people understand. Chinese leaders testify to the historical consensus that culture is central to the adaptation of human mind and action to communal life, work and authority, and therefore plays a central role in the formation of the local environment of everyday life as much as national political economy. As China's economic development since the death of Mao Zedong has not been based on predefined models or formal institutions, the Chinese Government recognises that China's diversified cultures and people's everyday lives have played that role – providing continuity, stability, coherence and commitment to productive labour. At the same time, culture is never ‘natural’ or an indigenous substrate of anthropological coexistence – it is constructed through the political will, with explicit socialist

values, and with a determined strategic intent. It is fundamentally ideological in the sense that culture is efficacious as a positive force for development only by its formation and management within the meanings and aims of the revolutionary communist state, and this is accomplished by ideology.

The Chinese Government's recognition of the significance of culture for development, its rejection of uni-dimensional development templates that ignore regional peculiarities, and its ambition to use values and morality to reduce the adverse effects of the market economy, form the analytical core of this thesis. In distinction to the mainstream approach in English speaking research, where China's cultural policy is defined simply as 'anti-democratic' and in need of political conversion to Western models and ideals, this thesis, rather, unfolds the historical-political complexity of China and culture, and further, will argue that without a conversion to a Western liberal-style democracy, cultural policy has a central role to play in China's evolution towards a more sustainable and Human-centred national development (where the terms 'sustainable and 'human' are commensurate with the United Nations and UNESCO sense of sustainable development and 'Human Development') that is distinctively 'Chinese'. A tenet of this line of argument is that the conditions for such cultural policy work, ideologically and practically (in terms of its role in political economy) is already present within Government national policy aims.

An accurate and truthful portrayal of Chinese culture and the cultural life of the people, is one axiom of the Chinese Government's management of culture – where 'truth' and the veracity of representation becomes a significant political question. Ideological construction work at once demands 'truth' but also can only admit to a truth that supports its central aims (with the cognitive framework of socialist values, Chinese 'characteristics', and the continually evolving

concept of communist society). The Government's cultural policy therefore contains multiple agendas, or at least must operate on different epistemic registers of representation in maintaining its ideological and institutional management over culture and its productive role within the political economy (see Chapter Three and Four). Crucial questions supplementary to our central research questions are, therefore, to what extent is China's cultural sector (the professional realm of cultural production) able to prioritise and represent people's culture and the realities of cultural life, within national policy frameworks? How does changing cultural production, and the demands of creativity and new products, impact or affect Government agenda for culture and its modes of ideological construction work? These questions, as we will see, give rise to a broad range of issues, but are nonetheless commensurate with the central argument of this thesis: culture and its central role in sustainable national development is rightly identified by Central government as both ideologically and strategically essential. However, its management of culture through its current policy regime is suffering a profound structural crisis. This crisis will be identified insofar as it pertains to an understanding of cultural policy in China – the role of cultural policy in meeting Government national development aims.

In order to account for the crisis of China's cultural policy, the following research investigation was conducted in two stages. First is the critical-historical account of the CPC's ideological construction work and the formation of cultural policy as an essential component in national political economy. The second stage of the investigation draws on 18 months of empirical research, providing research material for an analysis of the impacts of national development policy on China's television industry (TV).

In China, TV has become entangled in the political dilemma of culture in a most revealing way. Given the Government regulation and prescriptive role of broadcast media (as in most countries of the world), the way TV has managed its need to represent the cultural life of the people, and maintain audiences through creating new means and modes of representation, while all the time operating under explicit policy mandates, will form the focus of our analysis. TV is a 'core field' (主阵地) of ideological construction in China, which is heavily managed by the cultural policy regime. The content produced by the television sector to a large degree defines the legal-political boundaries of acceptability, the level of political management exerted over creativity, the extent to which policy is directly impressed on cultural producers in China, and also, the rhetoric of socialist values and national development. Moreover, the content produced by the 'traditional media' of TV is indicative of the content condoned or allowed in 'new media', internet and social media (since 2014), given that 'the content that cannot be broadcast by the traditional media is not allowed to be circulated on the Internet' (Sun, 2014: A3). Recently the Government has been making great efforts to strengthen and formalise its control over online audio-visual content, according to censorship standards that have first been established in practice in the cultural sector. The Government (since 2008) also prohibits the establishment of online media units that are not wholly owned or controlled by the State and has been fastidiously promoting the expansion of traditional media controlled by the Government in the digital sphere (see Chapter Four). Because of the expansion of traditional media on the Internet (cultural products such as TV programmes are thus also widely consumed and circulated on the Internet) the convergence of censorship standards of online content towards those of the traditional media offers a crucial insight into the role of cultural policy on actual cultural production (see Chapters Four and Six specifically).

This thesis takes a critical view of China's cultural policy, but at the same time the thesis aims to be constructive and propose a trajectory of development based on China's current political commitments to culture, diversity and sustainable development. The thesis does not simply offer a critical perspective on China's current spectrum of cultural policies, but identifies how these policies offer a significant opportunity for exploration and the future development of China. The thesis therefore aims to construct a knowledge that is both 'useful' and 'practical' for policymakers (as with the Marxist concept of 'praxis', which aimed to collapse a radical dichotomy between theory and practice). This thesis approaches China's cultural policy, therefore, as not only ideological work within an authoritarian Party-State management of national political economy, but as also concerned with constructive aims of national development. These aims, it is argued, do not preclude democratic forms of citizenship and self-determination, and cultural rights.

This thesis works toward this aim in three respects: (i) it broadens the normative Western-influenced approach to the cultural policy research of China, by contextualising historically the suppression of free expressions and the certain aspects of the creative industries; (ii) in not taking Western theoretical models as normative, the thesis views the Communist Party's own theoretical self-representation as a significant *cultural* framework, and this is supplemented by empirical research findings on China's TV industry – voices from within; (iii) the thesis does not rest on the premise that China is an 'underdeveloped' or inferior country to Western countries, or assume that its only hope is in persuading its political elites to convert to Western models of political economy and society (i.e. liberal democracy). We must explore new ways of understanding the role of cultural policies within national economic, social and political development.

As stated above in Section Five, initially, the following research draws heavily on Chinese leaders' utterances, official policy documents, the CPC's scholarly journals, and official or established historical sources. However, this research project takes a critical view of China's historical management of culture rather than simply affirming the 'perennial correctness' of Central Government's cultural policy (as many Chinese scholarly works do). From a detailed examination of China's historically evolved cultural system reforms, and specifically their impact on TV, this thesis demonstrates that the television sector's inability to adhere to the 'mass line' of culture is symptomatic of a general crisis for the Party's entire ideological project of economic development as well as the continual political legitimacy of the CPC.

2.7 Methodological Justification

This thesis is composed of three registers of research material – historical documentation, empirical research (including interview material) and contemporary policy research (on the policies, institutions and political management of the cultural realm today). As stated above, it is critical-historical in that it aims to construct an historical narrative that is explanatory and reveals how cultural policy in China is internal to (cannot be understood apart from) the historical evolution of the communist Party-State.

The very concept of 'culture' in China has been defined in terms of political obligations to the state. The cultural realm since the Mao era has been heavily defined in terms of a national discourse about the meaning and purpose of culture and its role in advancing the aims of the state (where, in China, 'state' is synonymous with 'society' or 'country'). This discourse, in turn, has generated a national consensus (or a dominant representation of a consensus) about the meaning of the term *Chinese culture* among scholars and ordinary people alike.

Unlike European history, where the 'modern', avant-garde, postmodern and contemporary have all, in their own way, defined the cultural realm as separate or autonomous from social or political realms, the realm of culture in China generally has not been perceived, nor formed an independent sense of agency, in the same or similar way. China's political development does not easily admit conceptions of autonomy for cultural (or social) realms of life, but rather all realms of life are determined by the national political project in the formation of a socialist state by a national communist party. This is not, of course, to elide any significant role to political opposition in contemporary art, dissenting writers or independent filmmakers (mentioned in Chapter Four), but such are not in themselves of interest to a study of cultural policy, where policy is by its nature an institutional and political activity by or on behalf of the state or local political authority.

This thesis aims to construct a narrative that allows for a critical investigation into the political construction of culture in China, and provides an informed basis on which to undertake a synchronic assessment of a central component of China's culture – which is also defined as a 'creative industry' – the TV sector. This thesis aims to contravene the Western cultural policy dichotomy of state and civil society, and therefore examines cultural policy by correlating Party-State political doctrine with governmental statement (speech or policy edict), policy context (as it evolves) and specific institutional management practices (or specific expectations on managing cultural production and its reception or consumption by audiences or the people). With the specific focus on the TV sector, this will be supplemented by detailed examination of two genres of TV product, and a broad socio-cultural assessment on the content of such (how its forms of media representation correlate with political expectation and the broad aims of cultural policy as it plays a role in national development). Within this

research I use techniques common to policy analysts, defining intentions and assessing the effectiveness of central Government's intended management of culture, how this management embodies the State-Party's aspirations to maintain political legitimacy, and how cultural production manages the developmental and political aims thrust upon it.

2.7.1 A critical-historical approach

A historical approach to cultural policy research in China is assumed to be necessary and vital to identifying and assessing the role of the Communist Party in shaping and regulating Government policy, specifically in terms of how cultural policy has emerged from the 'mass-line' of culture doctrine, which stipulates the party as the vanguard and the masses as the source of ideological construction. Such a principle is not wholly intelligible (certain not in relation to its compelling force in the cultural realm, experienced by cultural workers) without an historical account of the Party's revolutionary experience, clearly articulated by its revolutionary leaders (see Chapter Three). Institutionally, the significance of 'reform' as a process of political development, must also be fully accounted for, to situate culture as internal to long-term transformational process of continually updating the old institutional arrangements inherited from the planned economy of previous communist eras (enhancing the economic competitiveness of state-owned enterprises, and so on: see Chapter Four). Because ideological and institutional legacies still play an authoritative role in the political order, and particularly that the deliberations within China's huge one party system are diverse, a historical narrative that defines the evolution of cultural policy as internal to this system allows for an integrated approach to understanding its role in national development (where Government conceives of culture as social and economic in impact) .

Historical research is predicated on the exploration of change and continuity, and so understands reality as dynamic and mediated by action, decisions and therefore forms of power (Hamilton, 2004: 1-2). An historical analysis can identify the range of factors that often make up a policy reality, without dispersing its focus into a range of tangential questions. China's national political economy is central to this thesis – in the sense that this thesis aims to provide an historical-critical narrative on the evolution of cultural policy in China. For it argues that such a task must situate cultural policy within a broader historical understanding of the evolving political expectations, developmental realities and strategies that make for the past, present and future Communist state apparatus. Historical change is also, often, provoked by events and social environment, and the choice of TV as a principal mediator of Government cultural policy, (which is also a recognised 'creative industry'), allows the thesis to foreground the relation between culture and its 'contexts', that is, where 'context' is not 'external' but an internal dynamic within the policy discourse that permeates every part of life in a communist society. The Party-State of China and its perpetual work in 'ideological construction' can be understood as the cognitive dimension of national development, and thus not simply referred to as authoritarian diktat, but a dynamic policymaking in response to rapidly changing political, economic and cultural realities (Chapter Two). In this thesis the TV sector is positioned as to highlight this to its fullest extent. It foregrounds issues that are internal to cultural production in the arts, as well as the creative industries (such as popular entertainment). TV also points to the need to devise an integrated methodological approach to cultural-policy research in the Chinese context – that is, an approach capable of addressing the complexity of contemporary culture within China's changing political economy (Chapters Five and Six).

2.7.2 Interview method and data analysis

Interviews conducted with television practitioners play an important role in supplementing the historical narrative – not constituting or directing it. Interviewing is perhaps the most commonly applied research technique in data collection, here ‘elite’ interviews are employed (along with extensive reviews of relevant academic literature and government policy documents) in order to address two key questions: What are the major impacts generated by the central government's management of culture on the television industry's content production? To what extent are television practitioners able to prioritise the portrayal of people's culture and everyday life under the impacts of the government's cultural policy? Although methodologically, a question asking ‘to what extent’ may be deemed to be vague, it serves to register how China's cultural system was, and remains, in a perpetual state of change in relation to the confluence of obligations, directives and demands, and general function in mediating political ideology in coordination with national economic development aims). The gathered information and research material herein, accordingly, is presented in a chronological order.

The empirical research that supplements chapters Three and Four, and guides the research throughout (in ways not always visible in the text) has involved 18 programme producers, managers, news editors, and journalists. Sixteen of the interviewees held a senior position in their respective organisations with working experience in China's television industry for over eight years. Initially, two trail interviews were conducted with a news editor and a programme manager (both of whom were my former colleagues) from Hubei Jingshi TV. Based on the personal connections of the interviewees, and also on recommendations made by five scholars from the National Institute of Cultural Development, Wuhan University and the Department of Journalism and

Communication, Nanjing University, an expanding range of informants participated in this research gradually. The employment of 'network sampling' (Handcock and Gile, 2011) benefited the fieldwork in significant ways. First, it is not uncommon for research on China's cultural and media industries to suffer from low response rate due to the sensitive nature of the cultural sector as an ideological field. Owing to the help kindly offered by media practitioners and scholars, an informed view of industry was possible, and of the research subjects more than half of the potential interviewees eventually participated. Second, contact with 'insiders' greatly assisted in identifying those television practitioners who have great insight concerning my research questions, and who are willing to provide 'honest' answers to sensitive questions.

Most of the interviews took place in Nanjing, Wuhan, Hangzhou, and Changsha between June and November in 2016. Follow-up communications were held intermittently in 2017 and 2018. Although face-to-face communications for all interviews were attempted, two follow-up interviews were conducted in the form of video interview. At least one week before each interview, a list of core questions was sent to the participant via email or Wechat. A consent form which contained the purpose of the research, the (possible) future usage of the data and participant' rights were signed by interviewees at the start of a face-to-face communication. Additional written permissions were given by the five interviewees who agreed to be named in publications outside of China. All interviews were recorded with consent and were later transcribed by the researcher (all audio recordings and consent forms will be submitted to examiners on request).

Interviews conducted during the fieldwork (June 2016 - November 2017) were semi-structured in order to address specific research topics while giving space

to participants in generating new meanings. All interviews were guided by a list of pre-designed questions based on my research questions, participants' working experience and positions. At the beginning of an interview, two or three open-ended questions were raised concerning the participant's professional background. These questions were intended to elicit a narration of personal experience in China's creative industries. Details of the initial narrative such as statements, comments, and emotions were carefully noted by the researcher, which then served as an important basis of further inquiries that are related to the research subject. The second part of the interview was guided by four to five questions that are more theoretically driven, with a focus on television practitioners' tendency to portray ordinary people's culture and everyday life. Appendix 2 displays the pre-designed guiding questions for all interviews.

Interview data were analyzed using the procedure for thematic analysis described by Braun & Clarke (2006) and Galletta (2013). First, the full transcript of all interviews was carefully examined in order to identify information relevant to the research questions. Second, interview information was coded (i.e., assigned shorthand summaries or attributes) around each research question. During the coding process, the entire data was searched thoroughly to prevent omission. From this stage, I began to conduct follow-up interviews for confirmation and/or clarification of key concepts, ideas, events, and theories. Lists of different codes were then combined and grouped into overarching themes in response to research questions. As this research investigates two different types of television programmes, interview data on them were coded and analysed separately.

Themes derived from the interview data were supplemented by and cross-referenced with the government's ideological and institutional management of

culture, an extensive review of relevant literature on the two types of programme under investigation. Based on a triangulation of these data sources, the author provide a historical narrative of the development trajectory of the Minsheng programme and Reality shows in China, with a focus on their ability to adhere to the 'mass line' of culture – the fundamental ideological requirement of the CPC.

The biggest frustration of my empirical research took place in November 2016 when four interviewees from Hunan and Zhejiang cancelled previously scheduled interviews. I was informed by a deputy manager that due to the central government's political investigations of propaganda systems in a number of provinces (which later led to the arrests of several high-ranking officials), it was not a 'suitable' time for television people to receive interviews. As Chapter Six has shown, Reality shows produced by Hunan and Zhejiang satellite TVs play leading roles in China's television landscape, but this situation (not being able to arrange interviews with television practitioners) persisted in 2017, which brought challenges and frustrations to this research project. It was not until late 2017 did I manage to resume conversations with several research participants. Fortunately, I had finished the majority of the fieldwork by November 2016, and there has been a significant number of scholarly research conducted (particularly in the English literature) concerning reality television in China, which enabled me to complete Chapter Six without insurmountable difficulties.

Chapter Three:

The evolving logic of China's cultural policy and the impacts of the 'mass line' of culture

In the last chapter of the thesis, I pointed out that the Government of China aims to address multiple agendas through cultural policy, and this thesis assesses two of them – 'ideological construction', and national development.

This chapter will concern two issues that are of great significance within this: (i) the major concerns of the CPC's ideological project with the cultural sector, and (ii) the crucial importance of the 'mass line' of culture to the ideological causes of the Party-State. My examination and analysis of these two questions are structured as follows:

This current chapter opens with a discussion of Mao Zedong's now famous talks at the Yan'an Conference of Literature and Art. Mao's requirements for cultural works served as the guiding principles of China's cultural policy until the late 1970s, and still greatly influence the Party's propaganda work today. The CPC's ideological project of the reform era is placed within the context of national development and the major ideological requirements enforced by the Party-State on the cultural sector are examined. While there were specific ideological concerns (stories of important Party leaders, China's relations with Taiwan, social and religious issues in Tibet and Xin Jiang, for example), this chapter takes the general view and emphasises the enduring legacy of the mass line of culture and its normative aim on the integration of cultural work with the everyday reality of the lives of the people. This is pivotal to China's enduring

construction of a new 'socialist culture', and will remain a theme of the thesis throughout.

3.1 The 'mass line' of culture – the fundamental principle of cultural policy in ideological construction under Mao Zedong's leadership

'Ideology', for many, is a term that is closely associated with state power, its propaganda and attempted domination and control of thought, beliefs and values, and which contains few positive connotations. For both policy makers and academicians in the West, explicitly supporting the employment of cultural policy for ideological purposes, is an undertaking that acts against fundamental democratic principles like the independence of the media or the cultural sector from political influence. The predominance of 'scientific' approaches to mainstream policy making and academic research in Western countries (the construction of economics as a distinct 'scientific' discipline is a major example) has further assigned subjective and value-laden concepts such as ideology into a marginalised position; and it is particularly the case since the concept of 'false consciousness' (originally used by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels) has become indissolubly attached to the concept of ideology. In China, on the other hand, ideological construction has been one of the central agendas of the Communist Party since its establishment.

'Ideology' is an elusive concept, with a large number of proposed definitions (Griffin, 2006: 78; Knight, 2006: 619), but most scholars would agree that it generally refers to a contiguous set of shared values, ideas and beliefs that people use to interpret the social world and interact with their living environment (Gerring, 1997: 980; Jost, Federico and Napier, 2009: 309). It is also not controversial to observe that political ideologies are often constructed and

promoted by certain political forces in order to serve their own interests (Eagleton, 1994). According to the *Encyclopaedia of Standard Mandarin Chinese*, ideology is indeed 'a set of systematic beliefs and ideas shared by people concerning the society and the world that are formed upon a certain economic base'. And, 'philosophy, politics, law, arts, religion, morality, etc. are its concrete manifestations' (Xia, 1989: 1346). This is a direct interpretation of Marx's notion that ideology pertains largely to the dimension of society's 'superstructure' (Überbau) (Marx, 1904: 12).

Ideology, in the enduring Marxist sense, is a constitutive part of human culture, where 'culture' is not 'natural' or organic community (simply the benign traditional life of the common people) but is a composite of beliefs, values, ideas and moral standards constructed and promoted by political powers (such as a nation-state government or ruling class) (Griffin, 2006: 81). It is, furthermore, inculcated into people's consciousness through institutions such as media, education system, community associations and laws of the land. For seminal proponents of communist ideology – Vladimir Lenin and Antonio Gramsci – it is imperative that a political (communist) Party's ideology becomes an integral part of people's everyday lives, culture and even 'common sense' in order to form a coherent common mind and purpose in the cause of the revolutionary state. For Communist Party's leaders in China, the key ideological principle that has facilitated this integration of Party ideology and the life of the people is the 'mass line' of culture – a method of ideological and cultural leadership developed over decades of revolutionary struggle and national socio-economic development. And cultural policy – government activities undertaken in the sphere of culture – has been utilised under this principle in order to construct a national 'socialist culture' that forms the core of society.

'Policies on literature and art', the dominant expression of cultural policy under Mao Zedong's leadership, were a key focus of concern for the Party's revolutionary cause. From the establishment of the CPC in the 1920s to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the area of 'culture' was regarded as crucial battleground for the Party in political-ideological struggles. As Mao Zedong remarked in 1942, 'In our fight and struggles to liberate the Chinese people, there are two fronts: the cultural front and the military front. Since May Fourth, an army of cultural [figures] has been formed in support of the revolution in China' (quoted in Huang, 2009: 142). Throughout his life, Mao was preoccupied with people's political consciousness and assigned the importance of subjective will to a much more prominent status in revolution than Karl Marx did (Schram, 1969: 51; Dirlik, 2005: 127). He, on the one hand acknowledged Marx's original theory that the economic base plays a principle role on determining people's way of life, social consciousness and basic mentality (Marx, 1904: 11-12). On the other hand, he was clearly influenced by Leninism (with its emphasis on action-oriented political culture), by China's complex traditions and cultural forms, along with the Party's own revolutionary experiences (mobilising peasant movements, for example) and believed that the 'superstructure' greatly influences the common experience and understanding of the base-structure of society and economy (Knight, 2007a: 181; Meyer-Clement, 2015). Stressing the social function of culture explicitly, Mao stated that "Revolutionary culture is a powerful revolutionary weapon for the broad masses of the people. It prepares the ground ideologically before the revolution comes and is an important, indeed essential, fighting front in the general revolutionary front during the revolution" (quoted in Meyer-Clement, 2015: 46).

The theoretical underpinnings and basic principles of China's culture policy

under Mao's leadership were most comprehensively articulated by Mao himself in articles published in the early 1940s and particularly his talks at the Yan'an Conference of Literature and Art in 1942. In his famous 1940 essay *On New Democracy*, Mao gave a historical account of China's social transition and defined China's current status as predominantly a 'colonial, semi-colonial and semi-feudal society' characterised by its mixture of competing modes of production, political formations and cultures (Mao, 1991: 672). In Mao's scheme, the old revolution led by Sun Yat-sen and his Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang) was a national self-determined bourgeois-led revolution against European imperialist power and feudalism in order to establish a capitalist society and a state under bourgeois dictatorship. In spite of its (limited) success, once seized, the victory saw the bourgeoisie abandon the masses (the proletariat and the peasantry) and yield to imperial and feudal encroachment. Now facing the Japanese invasion, a new epoch had come for the CPC to unite all classes of Chinese people and particularly the proletariat and the peasantry, in a new revolution which under the current context would be first and foremost anti-imperialism but also anti-feudalism and anti-capitalism. The purpose of the CPC's revolution is to 'build a new society and a new state for the Chinese nation. That new society and new state will have not only a new politics and a new economy but a new culture' (ibid., 662). Such culture, Mao envisioned, would be a 'new-democratic culture belonging to the broad masses and is therefore democratic. It should serve the masses of workers and peasants who make up more than 90 per cent of the nation's population' (ibid., 663).

In his talks at the Yan'an Conference of Literature and Art, Mao laid down the basic rules of cultural works in revolution which served as the foundation of China's cultural policy until its influence abated in the 1980s. Delivered as the opening and the conclusion of the conference, Mao's speeches essentially

focused on two main issues: (i) for what audience should cultural works be created; and (ii) how should cultural works serve their targeted audience. Emphasising the first question (for whom) as an essential principle, Mao stipulated that literature and art should adhere to the 'mass-line' of culture. They are for the "overwhelming majority constituting more than 90 percent of our total population" and are thus "first of all for the workers, the class which leads the revolution" and "secondly for the peasants, the most numerous and unwavering allies in the revolution" (Mao, 1991: 855). In Mao's view, the fundamental interests of workers and farmers are manifested in their everyday struggles against the exploiting classes (capitalist, imperial and feudal) and their self-determined efforts to 'propel history forward' towards socialism. The CPC, as the vanguard of the proletariat, share with the masses the same aims and interests in the revolution. He therefore makes culture and art subservient to both the masses and the Party under the name of 'politics' and argues that "[t]here is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause" (ibid., 866). As to the second question (how to serve the intended audience), Mao explicitly warned against the possibility that intellectuals might be detached from the Party's ideology and subvert (consciously or unconsciously) the proletariat revolution. Many of the literati, according to him, originated in elitist social milieu and "have joined the Communist Party organisationally but have not yet joined the Party wholly or at all ideologically". "They take the petty-bourgeois stand and produce works that are the self-expression of the petty bourgeoisie" (ibid., 847).

The conflicted feelings held by Mao towards intellectuals were long-standing (Schram, 1969; Goldman, 1971), as on one hand he needed them to disseminate the Party's ideology and incorporate the revolutionary identities

and aspirations into the minds of the mass which for him are like 'blank sheets of paper' on which 'the most beautiful characters could be written' (Mao, 1991: 765). On the other hand, he believed that the urban intellectual themselves, along with the culture they represent and espouse, are in a dire need of reform. In order to solve this contradiction, Mao demanded that cultural workers must "go among the masses, they must unreservedly and whole-heartedly go among the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers for a long time in order to observe, experience, study and analyse all the different kinds of people' and 'all the vivid patterns of life and struggles" (ibid., 848).

As noted by both Wang (2017a) and Wang (2010b), in Mao's view it is not the 'ignorant' masses that are in need to be enlightened by the intellectuals. On the contrary, it is the bourgeois nature of the cultural elites that needs to be reformed, and this is to be done through absorbing the interests, feelings and aspirations of the masses. In order to construct a national 'new-democratic culture', Mao required a 'two directional education' in which the intellectuals first re-mould themselves by the proletariat and then sift, refine and articulate the consciousness and aspirations of the masses so they can be recognised and internalised by both (Keane, 2007: 54). Mao explicitly opposed literary intellectuals who only attempt to 'elevate' rather than to 'popularise' mass culture, and urged cultural workers to use the cultural forms that are familiar to the masses such as murals, folk music, folk tales and dances (Wang, 2010b: 105). Mao was certainly aware that indigenous cultural forms are often inherited from history and formed within the current social context (which according to him was colonial, semi-colonial and semi-feudal), but he took an utilitarian view for their familiarity and attraction to popular taste and believed that once repackaged with revolutionary ideology as the core, they will be easily accepted and gradually become a new (socialist) culture more advanced than their

original forms (Holm, 1991: 53).

Apart from emphasising the importance of constructing a socialist culture that is (indirectly) created by and belongs to the masses (Wang, 2017a: 395), in his talks at the Yan'an Conference Mao also put forward his requirement concerning whether cultural works should praise the masses or expose and criticise their problems. Mao's attitude was clear: because the socialist transition is a positive one, the proletariat as the main revolutionary force that led to this transition should mainly be depicted in a positive light. Mao admits proletariat necessarily have shortcomings hampering their revolutionary struggles, but he believes cultural workers should help and guide them to make progress rather than to criticise or ridicule. As he said: "[w]e should be patient and spend a long time on educating them and helping them to get these loads off their backs and combat their own shortcomings and errors... As long as they do not persist in their mistakes, we should not dwell on their negative side or make the mistake of ridiculing them or, even worse, of being hostile to them" (Mao, 1991: 849). As to the 'enemies' (whom Mao referred to as "Japanese imperialism and all the other enemies of the people"), cultural works should "expose their deceitfulness and cruelty, and at the same time to point out their defeat is inevitable" (ibid., 852). With regard to CPC's allies in the united front (the Chinese Nationalist Party, the national bourgeoisie and landlords), their resistance to the Japanese invaders should be extolled, but their oppositions to proletarian revolutions should be exposed and criticised (ibid., 850).

Mao and his Communist Party, whose revolutionary victories were largely dependent on the participation of the masses (particularly the poor peasants who constituted the majority of China's population), understood that real power ultimately resides in the people and a legitimate ruler has to be constantly

perceived by the masses as the representative of their own interests. In Mao's mind, 'illegitimate' regimes and classes such as the governments of the Qing Dynasty, the Chinese Nationalist Party, the national bourgeoisie and landlords, even though were able to achieve temporary political dominance, would necessarily be overthrown for their inability to represent the vast majority of Chinese people (ibid.,. 74). Throughout his life, he over and over again referred to the masses as the real source of revolutionary strength and emphasised the necessity for the Party in power to prevent any detachment from the masses (Vepa, 1979). When the CPC's legitimacy was based on its representativeness of the workers and peasants, the new democratic culture that Mao envisioned in the 1940s would play a pivotal role in creating and maintaining such representativeness. It would on the one hand create the revolutionary ideology within the minds of the people (when the socioeconomic conditions in China were substantially different from Marx's visions for revolution) and portray the Party as the vanguard of the proletariat, on the other hand it would constantly integrate the consciousness of the masses into the consciousness of the Party members to ensure the Party would not deviate from the source of its legitimacy (i.e., representing the masses). Mao aspired to construct a new 'national culture' that would intermediate and integrate the consciousness of the proletariat, intellectuals and Party members (Dirlik, 1983: 199; Wang, 2017a: 396). He wanted this 'culture' to be hegemonic in Chinese society, but voluntarily accepted and internalised by the masses so it would guide people's everyday actions. To achieve these aims, he argued in the aforementioned article and speeches that such 'new culture' should be first and foremost be closely related to people's own cultures and based on their everyday reality of political struggles.

After the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, when the CPC took

on the more complex task of national development, and when the interests of the Party and its popular constituency were no longer easily reunited based on everyday revolutionary struggles with their 'common enemies', the actual implementations of Mao's cultural guideline became dogmatic and arbitrary and greatly deviated from its original emphasis on the needs and interests of the mass public. In the First National Congress of Chinese Literature and Art Workers held in 1949, Mao's Yan'an Talks were adopted as the official principles for all cultural works (Tang, 1993: 50). 'Socialist realism' (with its emphasis on truthful depictions of the real lives of the masses) and 'revolutionary romanticism' (with its focus on praising the masses and elevating their spirits) became the two types of works officially sanctioned by central Government (Yan, 1996: 90-91; Cao, 2011: 28).

Both types of works, however, were still encouraged and demanded (after 1958) to concentrate on revolutions as the main theme, which rendered class struggles the dominant 'reality' and the appraisal of proletariat and the proletarian Party in revolutions as a dominant form of romanticism (cf. Cao, 2011: 55). Since the late 1950s, with the promotion of various national development projects under the planned economy (during which the Government required mass mobilisation and 'revolutionary enthusiasm'), the fiasco of the Great Leap Forward (which caused devastating effects on the lives of Chinese people) and the launch of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, revolutionary romanticism gradually replaced socialist realism as the only officially permitted genre.

Cultural works that were true to life rather than eulogising revolutions were regarded as revisionism and numerous intellectuals were persecuted for having created them. As the CPC took on economic, political and social restructuring

processes, the media and cultural sectors were also 'instrumentalised' for their functions in disseminating central policies and mobilising people's participation (Meyer-Clement, 2015). It reduced cultural works to mere propaganda tools for specific Government policies and rendered many professional intellectuals redundant as the aesthetic and artistic values of culture were subordinated to its instant functional roles. Partly because of their 'redundancy', since the anti-rightist campaign of 1957 hundreds of thousands of them were compelled to the countryside to be 're-educated' and their former positions were taken by Party carders, workers and peasants. During the Cultural Revolution, the Party's stringent control of culture according to its definition of revolutions and its political needs in specific contexts went to extremes and eventually turned into Mao's personal monopoly in deciding all important cultural matters. Taking a radical stance on his earlier beliefs in the power of the masses and the ability of revolutionary consciousness in remoulding social reality, Mao mobilised the masses against the Government and intellectuals in order to further consolidate his personal power and transform the ruling Party and Chinese society which in his eyes were becoming increasingly bureaucratic and alienated from the proletariat and from socialism (Tan, 2016: xv; Wu, 2014: 30). During the Cultural Revolution, the 'deified' Mao became almost the only source of political legitimacy and all cultural works that were deemed as against his personal creeds were banned and persecuted. The period between 1967 and 1976 was perhaps the most culturally deprived period in China's history characterised the dominance of 'eight model plays' featuring revolutionary romanticism produced by Mao's wife Jiang Qing and the near absence of any other cultural products (Xu, 2013: 271).

The dogmatic and arbitrary implementations of Mao's cultural policies since 1949, with its many negative effects on Chinese society, should not amount to

a complete denial of the fundamental principles of cultural policy put forward by Mao in the 1940s, and it is particularly the case for his emphasis on constructing a culture that derives from the masses and ultimately serves people's interests. As Wang Ban, a professor of Chinese literature at Stanford University, explains concerning Mao's Yan'an talks:

If a policy is derived from a realistic, accurate assessment of reality and is responsive to the demands of the society and people, it may prove to be a democratic expression of the popular will. Striving for the common good rather than allowing a handful of elites to grab power, this realistic policy could claim a corresponding realistic art, resulting in a healthy union of art with politics... In Mao's analysis, art and literature originate from social reality in its richness and immediacy, and the current reality is the authentic source from which artists can draw inspiration. (Wang, 2010b: 107)

When Mao delivered his speeches in Yan'an, his aim was to construct a new revolutionary culture that would converge the interests and consciousness between the Party and Chinese people against their common enemies. When the CPC became the ruling Party of China, when the interests of the Party and its popular constituency diverged under the new task of national development, the Party's and Mao's own needs dictated the cultural sphere and its policies leaned toward one-directional mobilisation and indoctrination. To a large extent, Mao and his Communist Party did successfully construct a 'revolutionary culture', an ideology so hegemonic and overriding that dictated the political, social, economic arrangements of China and heavily influenced people's everyday lives. The ruling elites, for example, based their development strategies on the ideal type of 'socialist man' and believed that under the planned economy, people who had been properly indoctrinated with

revolutionary consciousness would have tremendous energy to devote to economic growth and modernisation (Chi, 1986; Cheng, 2014: 41). For the mass public, their identities, educational choices, career prospects, marriages, and so on, were intimately affected by the classes they belonged to. During the Cultural Revolution, being assigned to the 'red' or 'black' category of classes could literally determine a person's life or death. During Mao's China, the successes and failures of national development were inextricably bound up with the omnipresent reach of revolutionary ideologies.

3.2 Adhering to the Party line in its new development cause – the fundamental principle of cultural policy in China's reform era

After the devastating Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), revolutionary ideology was soon abandoned by the CPC. During the historic Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Party convened in December 1978, the CPC repudiated the policy of 'continuing revolutions under the dictatorship of the proletariat' and formally decided to move away from class struggles. The new primary task of the Party, the session decided, would be of the rectification and improvement of the economy (China Development Research Foundation, 2011:123). Under its new pragmatic leader Deng Xiaoping, the implementation of market-oriented economic reforms and the opening-up of China's economy to the outside world became the basic national policy. According to Deng, "[a] market economy is not exclusive to socialism; socialism also has markets. Planning and the market are both economic instruments" (quoted in Ma, 2016: 5).

Replacing class struggles with economic development as the overarching theme of national development, Deng and his central Government intended to

recreate a consensus among Chinese people, and re-legitimise the CPC's ruling position through the enhancement of people's living standards (Wang, 2010c: 323). To propel economic development, Deng found it necessary to renounce class struggles and the dictatorship of proletariat (which were the central means and aim of socialism perceived by both Marx and Mao), abandon the adherence to the centrally planned and fully state-owned economic model (which were the fundamental features of the economic systems in Mao's China and the Soviet Union), and incorporate the markets and private ownership (the core institutional arrangements associated with capitalism). Facing tremendous ideological challenges concerning the radical transformation of China's development path, during his 'South China Tour' in 1992, Deng put forward the 'No Debate' policy (over whether the nature of China's reform is capitalist or socialist) and insisted that China's development should not be confined by dogmatic theories or guidelines (Baum, 1996). Instead, he upheld the principle 'seeking truth from facts' and believed that China's reforms should be evaluated primarily based upon the practical standards of 'three conduives' (三个有利于) principle – conducive to the strengthening of the productive force of the socialist society, to the consolidation of China's comprehensive national strength and to the enhancement of people's living standards (Li, 2017b: 157). In order to urge the Party to abandon the ideological differences between socialism and capitalism, Deng stated that "[i]t doesn't matter if a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice" (quoted in Hu, 2014: 1), implying his belief that the ideological nature of China's economic development should be regarded as much less important than the pragmatic result it is able to achieve.

Forsaking the theoretical and practical foundations of existing socialist principles for national construction, in their pursuit of the new 'socialist cause with Chinese characteristics' Deng and his successors necessarily faced an

increasing discrepancy between the Party's communist ideology and the pragmatic economic thinking opening to various arrangements. Deng's solutions to these problems, encapsulated by his 'no debate' and 'white cat and black cat' theories, were to contain ideological dissension, promote widespread economic experiments and selectively adopt and modify economic experiences from all over the world. Under Deng's leadership (1978- 1993), the CPC's policies concerning the cultural and ideological field went through a significant turn.

From 1978 to 1988, in order to demolish the Mao's cult, bring about a liberalisation of thinking and practice from the omnipresent reach of revolutionary ideologies and open up space for economic reform, the Party slightly relaxed its control over the cultural sphere and launched various campaigns aimed at opposing 'ultra-leftism' and 'liberating the mind' (Gladston, 2014). Although the CPC's institutional control over the cultural and media sectors remained, it has been observed that there was a relative official tolerance of journalists' criticism of the wrongdoings of government officials and investigative reporting of social events (Zhao, 1998: 35-36). The media and cultural sector went through a process of increasing secularisation away from Mao's ideologies and intellectuals were given the unprecedented chance to engage in public debates and disseminate opinions concerning China's future development (Cai, 2009: 47). From the mid-1980s, there was an emerging discourse in Chinese society advocating the democratisation of media away from the Party's control (Zhao, 1998: 37).

The nationwide pro-democracy movement in 1989 undoubtedly reminded the ruling elites of the power of culture and people's consciousness in transforming political and social reality (a belief Mao held throughout his life).

The notion was further confirmed by the subsequent collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (ideological liberalisation and the loss of control over the ideological sphere were regarded by leaders in China as major causes that led to the Soviet Union's demise). Immediately after the CPC's ruthless crackdown of the student-led demonstration, Deng Xiaoping officially criticised the Party for being slack in paying attention to the ideological and political work and stipulated that the construction of 'socialist ideology' should be regarded as a guiding principle of the Party. Bridging a direct link between the severe legitimacy crisis of the CPC with the loosening of ideological control, Deng (1989) reflected: "Our biggest mistake was in the area of education, in particular, political and ideological education" (paragraph 10).

In the work conference of the Central Propaganda Department held in November 1989, the CPC's new General Secretary Jiang Zemin condemned the media sector for disseminating thoughts of "bourgeois liberalisation" and contributing to the "anti-revolutionary rebellion against the Party and Chinese people" (Jiang, 1989, paragraph 9). He repeatedly cited Mao's remarks in the Yan'an conference and required the cultural and media sector to serve the Party, the working class and the mass public of China. Jiang asserted that the "nature of the Party" (党性) and the "nature of the people" (人民性) are the same, and to oppose the Party is to oppose the people. He required the media to "consistently maintain its position as the mouthpiece of the Party and the people" and to 'propagate the Party's political views, policies and guidance" (paragraph 26). According to him, the so-called "press freedom" flaunted by Western nations is in fact "the freedom of the capitalist class' to promote capitalist views" (paragraph 31). In the socialist system, media is not a capitalist cause but "the cause of the Party and the people" (paragraph 33).

From 1989 to 1993, the Party significantly strengthened the propaganda system (Brady, 2008), replaced the relatively liberal propaganda officials with conservative leaders (Liu, 1993), shut down media outlets that had supported the democracy movement, dismissed and arrested a great number of cultural workers who had promoted 'bourgeois liberalisation' and 'peaceful evolution' (Zhou, 1996: 34).

When the fundamental policy of the CPC had moved away from the revolutionary cause, Party leaders' invocation of Mao and revolutionary terminologies were not a call for the re-adoption of Mao's ideologies in cultural policies. Instead, as noted by Brady (2008), they were used more for their symbolic power in order to legitimise the Party's control in the cultural sphere and eliminate opposition to its new development cause. In the reform era, 'socialism' in China has necessarily become an ambiguous and indefinable conception, yet the term has been frequently utilised to suppress and eliminate the values, opinions and ideological trends the ruling elites find undesirable or threatening. Since 1989, propaganda and thought work have been regarded by the Party as the very 'lifeline' (生命线) of its power and legitimacy (Brady, 2017: 36), and the adherence to the 'socialist culture' and the Party leadership of the cultural sphere (despite the 'de-Maoisation' of the Party's economic policies (Malik, 1997: 126)) have served the fundamental principle of Government policies. The Party leaders after Deng Xiaoping have adhered to the expansion and consolidation of its control over China's cultural sphere (particularly the media sector) under its propaganda system, in spite of the rapid commercialisation of the cultural sector (see Chapter Four).

3.3 The reconstruction of the Party's ideological and cultural leadership

China's economic reform in the post-Mao era has been epitomised by its gradual and experimental nature and is encapsulated by the famous phrase 'crossing the river by groping for the stepping stone' (摸着石头过河). In sharp contrast to the socialist economic system during Mao's era and the neoliberal model that has dominated the capitalist world, China's economic transition has not been based upon fundamental a priori rules or a clear vision of a 'complete state'. As Deng Xiaoping remarked when he launched the Reform and Opening-Up policy: "What we are doing is a new undertaking, Marx didn't talk about it, our predecessors hadn't done it, and other socialist nations hadn't done it... We can only learn in practice and explore in practice" (quoted in Hu, 2017: 351-352). In the reform era, the central Government delegate the control rights over a substantial amount of resources such as fiscal income, state-owned enterprises, land, raw materials, energy, etc. to regional governments (Paus, 2009: 87; Xu, 2011: 1079-1086) and give almost exclusive rights to local governments in appointing and dismissing officials within their territorial jurisdictions (Zheng, 2007: 61). Under the central arrangements, local governments in China function in a highly self-contained manner and are responsible for initiating and coordinating economic reforms and providing social services within their jurisdictions (Kong, 2005: 75; Xu, 2011: 1078).

The significant autonomy of 'local regimes' under economic decentralisation has been widely regarded as a main feature of China's economic transition characterised by widespread economic experiments, innovations and mutual learning at all administrative levels (Oi, 2005; Tsai, 2007: 9; Keith, Lash, Arnodi and Rooker, 2014: 71; Nee and Opper, 2012; Zhang and Keister, 2016: 147). The central Government, on the other hand, take on such indispensable roles as initiating, coordinating and correcting experiments at sub-national

levels, scaling up and formalising successful and widespread economic arrangements (through national policies, laws and regulations) and steering the general direction and emphases of national development strategies (Corne, 2002: 382; Heilmann, 2008; Xu, 2011). The pragmatic, experimental and gradual nature of its development strategies greatly contributed to China's meteoric economic growth and its relatively steady transition from a planned economy to a market-oriented economy. Such achievements, however, have been accompanied by severe problems such as 'races to the bottom' which resulted from fierce regional competition (Xu, 2011: 1080), rampant abuse of power by government officials and other powerful vested interests (Zhao, 2006: 234; Wedeman, 2012: 76), burgeoning income inequality (Mukhopadhaya, 2017: 102), widespread environmental pollution and a severe lack of social welfare provision (China Development Research Foundation, 2013).

Having transformed itself from a revolutionary Party into a 'developmental Party', the CPC's legitimacy in the reform era is largely dependent on its ability to deliver performance (particularly economic development) and to enhance people's living standards. The absence of a fundamental theoretical and ideological framework for national development, and the highly pragmatic and experimental nature of Government's economic strategies, determined that the central theories and ideologies of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' are primarily practical responses to the socioeconomic changes resultant from existing developmental reality (which in turn has been largely a result of widespread economic experiments).

This was the case with 'Three Representatives', which is a guiding socio-political theory officially put forward by Jiang Zemin that aimed to legitimise

the once stigmatised private entrepreneurs who had already become crucially important to China's economy and to welcome them into the Party (Brown, 2012: 56- 57; Menges, 2005: 497); with 'Scientific Outlook on Development' and 'Harmonious Society', which are two guiding socioeconomic visions accredited to Hu Jintao that acted as a direct response to the negative social and environmental consequences after two decades' of one-dimensional pursuit for GDP growth and a call for governments at all levels to transform towards a more 'sustainable' mode of development (Wang, 2007a: 78). It was also a requirement for government officials at all levels to deal with the evident 'disharmony' of the society such as marches, riots and public anger that had become widespread under his leadership (Lian, 2017: 136); and with Xi Jinping's 'Four Comprehensives', which contains a set of developmental goals raised by Xi Jinping.

These goals, according to Xi himself, were a summary of his main policies derived from the developmental reality of China and aims to promote the solutions to the prominent contradictions and problems of Chinese society' such as income inequality, environmental degradation and corruption of government officials (People. com, 2015). As pointed out by Xu (2010:76) and Zheng (2016), the core 'ideological achievements' of the Party in the post-Mao era are primarily aiming at macro-managing governments' development strategies, maintaining and showcasing the leading position of the Party in the constantly changing national environment and demonstrating the legitimacy of the ruling elites' current policies. They are intricately elite-based 'practical ideologies' and are not intended to (nor are they able to) function as 'dominant cultures' to be internalised by the masses so as to guide their everyday actions or to explain their everyday reality.

In spite of its almost inevitable ideological hollowness as a communist Party, the CPC has never ceased its attempts to replenish its ideologies and reassume its cultural leadership over the mass public. However, in sharp contrast to Mao's era, it is no longer able to provide a fundamental and constant ideology that is able to guide or explain China's economic realities, let alone the social development that has been largely sidelined by the Party and the political system that is still most characterised by its Leninist features.

The three generations of leadership in the post-1989 era, therefore, had to resort to ideological sources that can be applied in the broadest sense (such as nationalism and moral values). Such 'universal values', due to their broad nature, are not only easy to receive consensus from the culturally and ethnically diversified Chinese population whose lives are now deeply embedded in the development realities of their own localities, but can also be utilised by the Party-State for political and developmental purposes on a national level (such as maintaining social order and stability, enhancing people's moral standards for economic development, and stimulating people's support for the Party's leadership and policies) without clearly defining or strictly regulating China's development. In the following section, we will turn to the three major emphases of China's cultural policy in the reform era – the adherence to positive propaganda, the promotion of patriotism and nationalism, and the construction of the Party's moral leadership. It is not possible here to provide a detailed account of the national leaders' entire efforts in constructing them (which range from various national campaigns to the everyday creation and dissemination of information). We must, however, focus more on the general shape of such projects and their primary impacts on central Government's control over cultural products (as these two aspects are most relevant to our discussion in this chapter and after).

3.3.1 Focusing on the ‘good’ and the ‘positive’

The emphasis on portraying the positive aspects of China is a consistent guiding principle of China’s cultural policy (Sun, 2010: 116). The notion of ‘positive propaganda’ (正面宣传) can be traced back to Mao’s Yan’an talks during which he highlighted the importance of praising the proletariat and the Party while criticising people’s enemies. In the post-Mao era, in spite of the official cordoning off of class struggles, the ruling elite’s perception of culture as an important tool for praising the Party and elevating people’s spirits and confidence under the Party’s leadership has remained, and this has been particularly the case since 1989 when the CPC took monopolistic control over the political sphere and the mass public were largely insulated from the state’s policy-making processes. Immediately after the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, Li Ruihuan, the newly appointed Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of propaganda, required the cultural and media sector to create a positive public opinion environment. According to him, the adherence to positive propaganda is directly related to the ‘success or failure’ of the socialist cultural cause (Li, 1989, paragraph7). He required the propaganda system to take the maintenance of political, social and economic stability as a central task and to focus on the positive depiction of China (e.g., the society, current development situation, effects of Party’s policies, etc.). Li did not negate the value of criticism and asserted that critical reports and critical depictions are important for the “construction and enhancement of the Party” (paragraph 24) and the “alleviation of public emotions” (paragraph 25). But he maintains that positive propaganda should take the “main thread” (主导地位) and critical ones should not harm social stability (paragraph 25). With the deepening of China’s economic reform and the emergence of all its negative effects, positive propaganda has been repeatedly emphasised by China’s

ruling elites since 1989 like a mantra (Brady, 2008: 95), and the positive depiction of China has been consistently regarded as a necessary means to maintain social and political stability. As the current President Xi Jinping highlighted in his speech at the National Conference of Propaganda and Thought Work: “Persisting in unity, stability and enthusiasm, and giving first place to positive propaganda, are important principles that must be observed in propaganda and ideology work... In the face of the challenges and difficulties of our socialist cause, we must adhere to the dissemination of positive energy and the stimulation of the whole society and Chinese people” (quoted in People's Daily, 2013, paragraph 6).

In China’s cultural and media sectors, the influence of the Party’s emphasis on positive content is ubiquitous and can be felt on an everyday basis. In the news sector, for example, critical reports concerning Chinese society and government officials are undoubtedly the most stringently controlled and heavily censored category of content (Wang, 2010b). The CPC has not only kept the entire news sector under its direct control (see Chapter Four), but also employed thousands of veteran Party cadres to work on ‘news monitoring groups’ in order to evaluate media units’ daily adherence to the Party’s ideological guidance (Brady, 2008: 22). Although the central leaders tolerate a certain extent of critical reports as a way of supervising governments, mitigating social conflicts and enhancing the Party’s legitimacy (Tong, 2011: 64-65; Burgh, 2015: 108), they have been haunted by the 1989 experience and constantly worry that too much critical coverage of China would disrupt social and political stability (Zhao and Su, 2007: 315). It has been widely observed that the space for critical reports in China can vary as it is largely dependent on the ruling elite’s attitude and political needs, but a constant Party line is that investigative journalists are not allowed to expose or criticise

high-level (i.e., provincial, municipal and central levels) Party members or government officials (Wang and Lee, 2014: 231). Due to the fact that all news agencies in China are structured under the sponsorship of Party committees or government organisations in their own regions (see Chapter Four), journalists have a strong tendency to cover social problems and government wrongdoings in other cities or provinces (Zhao, 2008; Wang and Lee, 2014: 232). Experienced critical journalists have been observed, although only on an occasional basis, to apply various 'guerrilla strategies' such as 'playing edge ball' (reporting sensitive stories that might test the limit of official tolerance while staying away from definite 'forbidden zones') (Wang, 2012: 16-17), 'racing against bans' (reporting a story as soon as possible before an official ban is imposed) (Tong, 2011: 69), and 'seeing the tree but not the forest' (focusing on individual cases rather than mentioning systematic flaws) (Wang and Lee, 2014: 235; Hassaid, 2016: 76). Such behaviours, however, can be risky and those who overstep the opaque official lines may face dismissals from posts, bans from journalistic activities or even harsher punishments (Dreyer, 2015).

For the 'non-news' sectors of China's cultural industries, the most obvious effects of the ruling elite's constant vigilance against 'excessive' negative content are reflected in the different institutional arrangements and censorship procedures that apply to various 'types' of cultural works. Indeed, one can make general sense of the different degrees of control that are imposed on China's cultural sectors according to their propensity to create texts concerning social/political issues and their audience sizes. At one end of the spectrum, sectors such as television, newspapers, online platforms that provide audio-visual services and films are most stringently controlled by the Government. As Chapter Four will explain in detail, these sectors are under

the direct leadership of the Central Propaganda Department and are regulated by a set of intricate rules concerning censorship and the entry of non-state capital.

Industries like design, architecture, theatre, cultural festivals and tourism, although rich in symbolic messages, are relatively loosely controlled by the Party due to their lack of political relevance or limited audience. They are usually under the direct leadership of the Ministry of Culture and have fewer entry barriers for private capital (The Ministry of Culture, 2016). At the other end of the spectrum, sectors that manufacture cultural equipment are not structured under the propaganda system and are normally not controlled for ideological reasons (Zhang, Wang and Zhang, 2016). Within the same sectors, various genres of content are also censored differently. TV programmes, dramas and films, for example, when featuring 'significant political events or sensitive social issues' are subject to more rigorous censorship procedures than 'normal' works (see Chapter Four). TV and film works that focus on contemporary society and people's lives are generally more heavily censored than works that feature other historical periods. As Chapters Five and Six will show, the CPC's institutional arrangements and censorship procedures have profound effects on the content produced by China's TV industry.

3.3.2 Promoting patriotism and nationalism

With the decline of the ideological effectiveness of Marxism and Maoism, nationalism and patriotism have been instituted by the CPC as a major means of unifying Chinese people and bolstering their allegiance with and support for the state and the Party (Gries, 2004; Hyun and Kim, 2015). The promotion of patriotism and nationalism, when carefully orchestrated, are also regarded by

the ruling elite as instrumental to the maintenance of social and political stability (Guo, Cheong and Chen, 2007: 468). State nationalism (or official patriotism) in China in the reform era has been most characterised by its emphasis on China's 'wounded experience' in the modern era and its salvation and prosperity under the leadership of the Party.

According to official discourse, China was a glorious ancient civilisation who fell victim of oppression and humiliation from the Opium War in the Qing Dynasty to the Japanese invasion in 1937. The CPC, on the other hand, is the Chinese people's saviour and the protector of them from enemies and threats (Guo, 2004: 33; Coble, 2007). This official narrative (and the broader political discourse constructed around it) has been reiterated by the four generations of Chinese leaders in their national speeches (e.g., Jiang (2005); Hu (2011); Xi (2015b); (2017)), incorporated into the educational system (Grant, 2014: 196), and widely disseminated by the Party's mainstream media outlets. In the post-1989 era, this 'wounded history' has been frequently extended by the Party to a sense of 'victimhood' of China that is still antagonised by capitalist powers (particularly by western countries).

It has also been widely observed that the sanctions imposed by the West after the Tiananmen incident, China's diplomatic conflicts and territorial disputes with Japan and Western nations and criticism concerning China's human rights record have often been portrayed by Chinese media as 'international hostile forces' that aim to sabotage China's development and stability (Guo, 2004: 33; Guo, Cheong and Chen, 2007; Hyun, Kim and Sun, 2014). What goes in tandem with the official 'victimised discourse' is the promotion of national prosperity under the Party's leadership. In line with the CPC's emphasis on positive propaganda, 'national achievements' arranging from

mega events like the handover of Hong Kong (Pan et al., 1999), the Beijing Olympic Games (Han, 2011), to daily life issues such as the increase in overseas returnees and the booming of outbound tourism have all been accompanied by the official media's stimulation of nationalist sentiments (Shen, 2007).

With the enhancement of China's economic and political power in the reform era, and with the increasingly close connections between China and the outside world, in recent years there has been a distinct increase in the official discourse depicting a prosperous and powerful China who confidently takes its own 'socialist' road and contributes greatly to world development. The incumbent president Xi Jinping, by incorporating his 'Chinese Dream' (中国梦) theory into the core of the CPC's ideologies, has undoubtedly raised nationalism (to a large extent also positive propaganda) to an even more important status than his predecessors. As Lim (2014: 84) rightly pointed out, although Xi's vague 'Chinese Dream' encompasses a wide range of development goals (or 'national dreams') such as environmental protection and the enhancement of people's standards of living, lying at its core is a strong nationalistic appeal aiming at receiving the widest consensus through 'national renewal'.

As Xi himself remarked when explaining his theory on an official visit to the National Museum of China: 'In my view, to achieve the great revival of the Chinese nation is the grandest Chinese dream of the Chinese nation in the modern era... History tells us that the fate of every one of us is closely connected to the state and the nation. Only when the state is well and the nation is well can everyone be well' (quoted in Yang, 2015: 175).

For cultural products such as TV programmes and films, nationalism does not function as a normative censorship standard (i.e., cultural works will not be banned when they do not focus on promoting patriotism and nationalism). However, when the Party leaders find it necessary to strengthen the curriculum of 'patriotic education', they can temporarily stop the broadcasting of other cultural works on a national scale. In August 2014, for example, in order to celebrate the 70th anniversary of China's National Day, the central Government ordered all TV stations to concentrate on 'patriotic themes' for two months. As a result, a great number of TV series that were being broadcast were suddenly pulled off and China's TV screens from the beginning of September to the end of October were filled with 'anti-fascist' dramas, particularly those depicting anti-Japanese wars (Huang, 2014a). In the film industry, since the early 1990s central Government has been rendering vigorous support to films that feature the official discourse of nationalism by depicting the CPC's revolutionary history (especially the anti-Japanese war and China's Civil War) and exemplary Party cadre's stories from China's reform era (Zhang, 2011a: 390-392). The Chinese Government not only provide substantial financial aid to such type of films (a special film development fund largely aimed at financing such kinds of works was established in the 1990s, and which until today received five per cent of Chinese cinemas' entire income), but also frequently use administrative orders to promote their nation-wide distributions and exhibitions (Zhang, 2008: Meyer-Clement, 2015).

3.3.3 Constructing the Party's moral leadership

The construction of nationalism, of course, requires more than the creation of a common wounded history, 'hostile others' and a powerful nation-state to constantly arouse people's patriotic emotions, as it also entails the formation

of commonly shared cultural elements such as values, beliefs, customs, myths, etc. to maintain individuals' national identities and make sure their nationalistic sentiments can be effectively stimulated in the first place. The CPC's intention to build a national socialist culture, on the other hand, goes way beyond its attempt to make nationalism more effective and is ultimately aimed at influencing people's consciousness and everyday lives (which involves much more than their nationalistic sentiments and actions) in a way that is advantageous to its ruling. With the increasingly close connection between China and the global economy and the concomitant influx of global culture (particularly American culture), the task of replenishing the Party's ideologies and re-establishing the Party's cultural leadership is more urgent than ever for the ruling elite. As declared by the former President Jiang Zemin in 2001 that "A few nations...have tried to force their own values, economic regime and social system on other countries by taking advantage of economic globalisation" (quote in Knight, 2007b: 58).

With the loss of the attraction of Marxism/Leninism to the mass public and the increasing irrelevance of the Party's own 'revolutionary traditions' to today's Chinese society, the Party leaders' interests in China's abundant cultural resources, which not only have sustained thousands of years of authoritarian rules but are also deeply embedded in contemporary people's lives, is hardly surprising. Their interests were further enhanced by the (allegedly) important roles played by Confucian values and ethics in achieving 'economic miracles' and social order in some of China's East Asian neighbours (Li, 2015). Since the mid-1990s, the promotion of China's 'refined and excellent traditional culture', along with the promotion of patriotism, Marxism/Leninism and Mao Zedong's and Deng Xiaoping's thoughts, frequently appear in documents issued by central Government concerning education, citizens' cultural and

spiritual construction (e.g., The CPC Central Committee, 2001; The Ministry of Education, 2014; Central Office of the Spiritual Civilisation Development Steering Commission, 2017). There have also emerged a vast number of government-sponsored research institutions, conferences, projects, cultural products, etc. that focus on Chinese traditional culture in general and Confucianism in particular (Ai, 2009: 692).

Slogans put forward by central Party leaders, such as ‘Harmonious Society’ (和谐社会), ‘Moderately Well-off Society’ (小康社会)⁵ and ‘Chinese Dream’, all apparently reflect elements of Chinese traditional culture. However, to say that the CPC is ready to fully embrace Chinese traditional culture or Confucianism (both were repudiated during Mao’s China as ‘feudal dross’) is erroneous as it has never attempted to abandon its revolutionary history as a major source of its legitimacy, Marxism/Leninism as the core of its political system or ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’, which stresses both the Party’s Marxist origin and its pragmatic economic strategies. In the official discourse, the Party’s attitude towards Chinese traditional culture has always been ‘to discard the dross while assimilating the essence’ (取其精华, 去其糟粕) (e.g., Hu, 2007a; Xi, 2017b).

The central Party leaders, while supporting the promotion of Chinese traditional culture, have repeated and vehemently warned against any suggestions to systematically adopt Confucianism as the Party’s only core ideology or as the foundation of its political institutions (Ai, 2009; Li, 2015). For the ruling elites, China’s traditional culture does provide valuable content, but they need to use it selectively in order to reach their political ends. At the

⁵ Both ‘hexie’ (harmonious) and ‘xiaokang’ (moderately well-off) originated from the Classic of Rites (a core text of the Confucian canon).

same time, Confucianism's emphasis on moral cultivation also provides an important means to incorporate the Party's aspirations and requirements in the form of moral values (even though these values may not be based entirely upon Confucianism).

In the post-Mao era, the most ambitious official expression of the Party's ideology has been the promotion of 'socialist core values' (社会主义核心价值观) which were formally adopted by the CPC's 18th National Congress in 2012. Officially categorised at three different levels, the twelve values include 'prosperity, democracy, civility and harmony' at the national level; 'freedom, equality, justice and the rule of law' at the social level, and 'patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship' at the citizen level. According to Liu Qibao, the Head of the Central Propaganda Department, these values have answered two important questions: (i) the CPC's aims for national and social development, which include its aspirations of and requirements for institutions and mechanisms; and, (ii) the Party's cultural and moral requirements for improving Chinese citizens' ways of thinking and everyday conduct (Liu, 2014).

President Xi Jinping argued in his book *How to Deepen Reform Comprehensively*: 'We need to energetically foster and promote core socialist values; promptly establish a value system that fully reflects Chinese characteristics, our national identity, and the features of the times. Ethical values play a very important role in core values. Without morals, a country cannot thrive, and its people cannot stand upright' (cited in Gow, 2016: 97-98). Although the majority of socialist core values are without much controversy, when values such as democracy, freedom, justice and rule of law are raised by an authoritarian regime, their definitions are necessarily contentious. Since

the CPC's official decision to promote socialist core values, there has been a great number of articles published by the Party's central organs and publications arguing that the meanings of these four values are different from how they are used in the West.

According to Liu Qibao, democracy and freedom in China are based upon and provided by the multi-Party cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the CPC, and China should 'firmly resist' such 'erroneous ideological trends' such as Western constitutional democracy and universal values (Liu, 2016, paragraph17). Since its official adoption, the promotion of socialist core values appears in every central document concerning China's cultural sector and has become a constant requirement for cultural works.

However, to implement these twelve abstract words can be difficult and it has been observed by cultural workers in China that by requiring cultural works to incorporate these values, central Government first and foremost reconfirm the crucial importance of positive propaganda and patriotism/nationalism (Wang and Shi, 2016). The emphasis of China's cultural policy is not on exposing or criticising the 'undemocratic', 'unequal', 'unpatriotic' or 'uncivilised' aspects of China, but on highlighting the positive aspects of the Government, society and Chinese people according to these 'standards'. As Luo Shugang, the Director of the Ministry of Culture stated: "Incorporating Socialist Core Values in cultural industries means that we should promote patriotic, collective and socialist thoughts, and propagate a virtuous, honest, helpful, social atmosphere", and that "we should focus on the promotion of positive energy in order to make people internalise socialist core values into their spiritual pursuits and voluntary actions" (Luo, 2018, 1:14). Second, the ruling elite's shift towards ethical leadership and the moral emphasis of socialist core

values gives rise to the strengthening of censorship concerning the moral standards of cultural products.

Although the CPC has always opposed all sorts of 'decadent cultures' such as pornography, superstitious thoughts and Western values that might threaten its ruling base, in recent years there has been a heightened official control over cultural products that promote values of money fetishism, fame and hedonism (as chapters Five and Six show, the Government's response is directly related to the tendency of China's cultural sector to promote luxurious lifestyles and to focus on celebrities in the showbiz world). For the Party leaders in China, these cultural trends not only signify the westernisation of China's cultural sector that undermines Chinese traditional culture and the Party's revolutionary culture, the money-seeking and pleasure-pursuing lifestyles, once they become prevalent in Chinese society, will lead to people's loss of any genuine faith in and devotion to the Party, the nation and China's socialist cause.

As Xi Jinping emphasised when meeting the Chinese Federation of Literary and Art Circles and China Writers Association⁶ in November 2016, that cultural workers should "consciously abandon vulgarity (庸俗), low taste (低俗) and damping down (媚俗), and oppose the decadent thoughts of money worship, hedonism and extreme individualism" (Xi, 2016, paragraph 41). Commenting on Xi Jinping's remarks concerning the importance of moral construction, Chen Kailong, the head of the Teaching and Research Department of the Party School of CPC Central Committee asserted that '[i]f money fetishism and hedonism become prevalent, China will be reduced to a

⁶ The Chinese Federation of Literary and Art Circles (中国文学艺术联合会) and China Writers Association (中国作家协会), both established in 1949, are two organizations that consist of nationwide literature and art associations.

lazy, depraved and inactive nation' (cited in CNR. cn, 2017, paragraph 5).

3.3.4 Taking up the market – the bottom line of cultural works in post-Mao China

China's cultural works, apart from being subject to stringent Government control, have to be able to attract consumers in order to survive in the marketplace. As Chapter Four discusses in detail, China's cultural and media sectors began the process of industrialisation and commercialisation as early as the late 1970s as a direct result of the Government's decision to initiate economic reforms and its lack of financial capability to subsidise the operation and modernisation of cultural units. The market-oriented transition of state-owned units, along with the rapid emergence of private cultural enterprises radically transformed China's cultural sphere.

By the late 1990s, the financial sources of the vast majority of state-owned cultural and media units had shifted from government subsidies to the market and the profit-oriented transformation of China's cultural sector was being widely regarded by both government officials and cultural workers as a 'law of motion' (or, inevitable: Zhao, 2000: 14). In 2000, the term 'cultural industries' was first used in a central Government document (The CPC central committee's proposal to formulate the tenth five-year plan for national economic and social development) and the promotion of it was not only closely linked to the development of socialist culture but also to the national economic strategy, particularly the acceleration of information/service-based economic sectors (The CPC Central Committee, 2000). In his report to the 16th CPC National Congress in 2002, President Jiang Zemin juxtaposed the advancement of socialist culture with economic and political developments. According to him, "Developing cultural industries is an important avenue to

enriching socialist culture in the market economy and to meeting the spiritual and cultural needs of the people. It is essential to improve policies toward the cultural industries, support its development and enhance its overall strength and competitiveness of our nation's cultural industries” (Jiang, 2002, paragraph 51).

In 2011, China’s 12th five-year national development plan officially put forward the national strategy to promote cultural industries into the pillar industry in national economy and required China’s cultural sector to consistently put its social effect in the first place, and to realise the organic unification of its economic and social benefits (National Development and Reform Commission, 2011). For the Chinese Government, just like for other national governments that have incorporated cultural/creative economy into their development strategies, the cultural industries have a putative huge potential as a mechanism to increase GDP, and are important for the enhancement of national economic competitiveness and the ‘upgrading’ of economic infrastructure with a new orientation towards information and knowledge-based technologies, culture and creativity (Lin, 1999; Ye, 2000).

But apart from its importance to the overall economic development of China, the success or failure of the socialist ideology the Party leaders aim to construct is dependent on whether it can attract consumers to the market-oriented economy. Since the late 1980s, a consensus has been reached among the ruling elite that blatant indoctrination tends to generate a weariness and distrust of the Party’s ideology, and government officials need to value the ‘art of propaganda’ in order to attract people to voluntarily accept their messages (Chan, 2007: 552; Brady, 2008: 32). The rise of commercial culture undoubtedly poses a threat to the Party’s cultural leadership. At the

same time, however, its power in enticing and influencing minds, once effectively utilised, offers an important opportunity to reverse the dogmatic nature of political indoctrination and make them palatable to Chinese people. As Li Chanchun, the former member of the Politburo Standing Committee in charge of propaganda stated explicitly: “The more our cultural products conquer the market, the more fortified our ideological front will be, the better the social benefits” (quoted in Zhao, 2008: 111).

3.4 The crucial importance of the ‘mass-line’ of culture in China’s reform era

In the first section of this chapter, I explained in detail Mao Zedong’s requirements for cultural works, and his ambition to construct a national culture that integrates the consciousness of the Party with the consciousness of Chinese people. In Mao’s scheme, China’s national culture would consist of two primary sources: (i) the Party’s revolutionary ideology, and (ii) the people’s real lives, feelings and aspirations. He aimed to integrate the two into a unified hegemonic culture that serves both the interests of Chinese people and the CPC. To reach this aim, he demanded cultural workers to adhere to the ‘mass line’ by inculcating revolutionary ideology into the minds of the masses on the one hand, and assimilating themselves into the masses and using people’s real lives, feelings, aspirations, experiences and values as the sources of creations on the other.

For Mao, cultural works created under the leadership of the CPC must not be detached from the real lives of the masses for two crucial reasons. First, since the Party’s legitimacy is based upon its representativeness of Chinese people, cultural works need to constantly integrate the consciousness of the masses into the consciousness of the Party so it would not deviate from its popular

constituency. Second, since the ultimate aim of the Party's ideology is to shape people's consciousness and guide their everyday conduct, cultural works first and foremost should be closely related to people's real lives so they can 'function' effectively. The very foundation of the national culture, as discussed before, would be revolutionary ideologies as in Mao's mind they embody the fundamental interests of both the CPC and the vast majority of Chinese people.

In China's reform era, the fundamental source of the Party's legitimacy is no longer its representativeness of the majority of China's population in their struggles against the exploiting classes. Instead, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the Party shifted its focus towards economic development with the attempt to re-legitimise the Party through the improvement of people's living standards. Under the Chinese Government's economic strategies that emphasise experiments, innovations and gradual change, from 1978 to 2017, China's national GDP has increased from RMB 367.9 billion yuan to over 80 trillion yuan, and its GDP per capita has increased nearly seventeen-fold (Xinhuanet, 2018).

The significant enhancement of the vast majority of Chinese people's income, however, has been accompanied by severe problems such as huge economic inequality, a lack of social welfare, and rampant environmental deterioration that significantly reduce the quality of people's lives. Unable to provide a fundamental and overarching ideology to explain or guide China's developmental realities, the ruling elite use the vague term 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' to preserve the communist nature of the Party and China's political system on one hand, and to allow 'non-socialist' economic and social arrangements on the other (Wang, 1994: 108). In order to replenish

its increasingly 'hollowed out' official ideologies, the CPC has been resorting to broad ideological sources such as nationalism, patriotism and moral values. They are chosen to replace revolutionary ideologies as the core of China's socialist culture not because of their already pervasive embeddedness in China's disparate economic, social and political arrangements, but for the fact that they are easily accepted by Chinese people, and are advantageous to China's national development and the Party's legitimacy.

Because the official ideology has a national focus, abstract content (such as 'core socialist values'), lacks systematic connections to current social realities, is always put forward and promoted in a top-down manner, it is unlikely to be fully internalised by the masses so as to play an important role in shaping their whole consciousness or guiding their everyday actions⁷. The reconstruction of the Party's ideology, however, is an ongoing process and the current bottom line for the Party leaders appears to be that it should contribute to the unification of people's minds concerning the most important matters (e.g., people's support for the Party and its policies, people's confidence in China's current situation and its future development, their self-identification as Chinese whose national interests and prosperity are inseparable from the Party-State, their perception of the ruling elite as 'noble leaders' and their willingness to act according to the moral values advocated by the Party).

As President Xi Jinping emphasised on a great number of occasions, both

⁷ Two large-scale surveys that are conducted in recent years are very illustrative. In 2010, People's Tribune Magazine, People's Net, Xinlang and Tencent carried out a research participated by 9316 citizens concerning their opinions on China's official ideologies and culture. Over 60 per cent of participants found official culture to be aversive or irrelevant (Questionnaire Survey Center of People's Tribute, 2010: 14-15). Professor Fan Hao (Southeast University) and his colleagues carried out a survey involving over ten thousand citizens from four provinces. 65.5 percent of participants found that official ideologies 'should be modified and need new explanations'. Only 16.4 percent believed that 'current official ideologies should be safeguarded' (Fan, 2012: 429-431).

'socialist core values' and patriotism are significant efforts to seek and construct 'the greatest common divisor' (最大公约数) among Chinese people in order to unify thinking and build consensus (e.g., Xi, 2014d; 2015; Xinhua News Agency, 2017). According to him, in the context of commercialisation and globalisation, 'when people's interests and values become diversified, and when Western values and erroneous trends of thoughts infiltrate into, influence and disrupt the construction of socialist ideology, finding and building common interests and common values among the diversified thoughts and cultures in the whole society should be the core focus of our ideological work' (Xi, 2015a, paragraph7).

When national development is no longer based upon a fundamental ideological framework and when the ruling Party suffer from ideological hollowness while still attempting to resume its cultural leadership, having a cultural sector that promotes content that is closely related to people's real lives and cultures remains crucially important for the ruling elite. On October 15th, 2014, in an obvious attempt to echo Mao's talks at the Yan'an Conference of Literature and Art, President Xi Jinping held the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art which gathered 72 elites from China's cultural sector and senior propaganda officials. During the forum, Xi reiterated the Party's requirements for cultural works to promote patriotism, positive propaganda and morality. At the same time, he emphasised the significance of Chinese culture for China's development and the importance of cultural works to serve Chinese people, and reflect their consciousness and lives. According to Xi Jinping, "Chinese people are the creators and witnesses of history, also the 'characters' and writers of history" (Xi, 2014, paragraph 27). "Without the flourishing of Chinese culture, there is no revival of the Chinese nation" and "without the guidance of advanced culture, the richness of people's spiritual

worlds, or the continuous strengthening of the national spirit, China is not able to stand firm among the nations of the world” (paragraph 10). In order to promote Chinese culture, enrich people’s minds, consolidate the Party’s ideologies and its cultural leadership, Xi Jinping required cultural works to “reflect well the people’s wishes” and “persist in the fundamental line of serving the people and serving socialism” (paragraph 27). If cultural workers want to achieve success, he argued, “they must consciously breathe together with the people, share their fate, link their hearts with the people’s hearts, feel joy for the joy of the people, suffer for the suffering of the people, and be servants of the people” (paragraph 35). He continued to state: “Art may give wings to imagination, but it must absolutely have its feet on terra firma. We should use realist spirits and romantic feelings to contemplate real life, use light to disperse darkness, use the beautiful and the good to vanquish the ugly and the evil, let the people see that beauty, hope and dreams are ahead” (paragraph 39).

For the political elite in China’s reform era, one can ascertain three central political motives animating the ability and tendency of China’s cultural sector to adhere to the ‘mass line’. First, the Communist Party leaders perceive Chinese people as the creators of the nation’s history (see Xi Jinping’s remarks above and Chapter Two, Section 4). In the post-Mao era, China’s history and culture are no longer dominated by revolutionary ideologies as something predefined by the Party. Instead, they exist as an evolving bricolage that consists of numerous elements but is ultimately and constantly felt, ‘lived out’ and (re)created by contemporary Chinese people. It is the diversified cultures of the masses (rather than the homogeneous ideology of the Party) that constitute the very foundation of contemporary ‘Chinese culture’. The Communist Party’s official ideology, with its current emphasis on

patriotism and certain moral values, needs to absorb ingredients from the masses so as to replenish itself. In other words, the construction and promotion of the CPC's ideologies need to rely upon the vitality of 'socialist culture' (in the Government's terms) with Chinese people's diversified cultures as the very foundation. As Xi Jinping's 'the greatest common divisor' indicates, the focus of China's ideological construction has been on finding and building 'cultural commonalities' such as values and aspirations among the masses. Without the protection and promotion of Chinese people's cultures that sustain their common values and ideas, the Party's ideological construction would lose its very cultural and ideological source.

Second, official ideology in China's reform era suffer from 'defects', such as the lack of relevance to China's political reality and people's daily lives as well as its vague and abstract content. Chinese citizens tend no longer to be inculcated by Party messages through top-down administrative campaigns. The Party leaders therefore need cultural works so as to generate a more intimate focus on the daily lives of people and use the people's living reality to demonstrate the value and values of official ideology in today's society.

At the same time, they need cultural workers to use the linguistic manner of ordinary people – narrative or stories relating to real events and other ways to engage the emotions so ideology becomes a material reality, or at least familiar and persuasive enough to negotiate cooperation and conformity. Without closely connecting the Party's ideologies to the 'grassroots' in contemporary society, the former will remain grandiose political slogans that are beyond and irrelevant to the daily lives of the masses. In China's reform era, Mao Zedong's creed that propaganda work has to be closely related to people's real lives in order to be effective continues to be a fundamental

requirement of the Party's ideological work (Brady, 2008), and the Party continue to emphasise the importance of 'two-directional education' (i.e., using people's lives and consciousness to supplement, demonstrate and substantiate official ideologies while using its ideologies to educate the masses) (Editorial Committee of the *Handbook of the Party's Propaganda Work at Grassroots Level*, 2008: 3).

Emphasising the importance of cultural works to be based on people's real lives, Xi Jinping remarked at the Beijing Forum: "People are the sources of flowing water for literature and art creation, whenever they are removed from the people, literature and art will change into rootless duckweeds, baseless groaning, and soulless bodies" (Xi, 2014, paragraph 31). Quoting Lenin in his support, he said: "Literature and art belong to the people. They need to have a solid foundation at the grassroots, they need to be understood and loved by the masses. They need to integrate people's emotions, thoughts and wills and improve them" (Xi, 2014, paragraph 31). The 'mass-line', Xi emphasised, "is the Party's fundamental principle for literature and arts. It determines the prospect and fate of our nation's cultural and artistic cause" (paragraph 27).

Third, as I have mentioned in Chapter Two, the Party-State recognise that culture plays significant roles in China's national development. Culture (particularly people's everyday life, values and moral standards) are regarded by Party leaders as crucially important in the maintenance and enhancement of social order and trust, and in supporting the vitality of a regionalised socialist economy. Because the Party's official ideology currently has a limited relevance to most people's living realities, it is Chinese diversified cultures that play the primary role in forming values, moral standards, aspirations, identifies, sentiments, etc. and shape people's consciousness and guide their

everyday actions when constructing surrounding environments. To realise culture's potentials in social harmony and economic vitality, therefore, China's cultural diversity and people's living realities need to be protected and promoted before they can be 'enhanced' and unified in certain aspects. Cultural and media sectors, needless to say, are an indispensable tool in safeguarding, preserving and promoting people's cultures.

Conclusion

This chapter traces the Communist Party's ideological construction since Mao Zedong's leadership as dynamic policymaking processes in response to changing political, economic and cultural realities. It points out the fundamental importance of the 'mass-line' principle for the Party's ideological formation. For China's ruling elites, whether or not the nation's cultural sector is able to adhere to the 'mass line' of culture would determine the success and failure of the Party's ideological project because first, Chinese people's cultures form an important source which replenishes the Party's ideology, and second, it is imperative that cultural works integrate the Party's ideology into people's real lives and cultures so it can have real relevance to and influence on the mass public, and third, people's culture and everyday life sustain the norms, values and identities that are indispensable for social order, trust and economic vitality.

Because the ability and tendency of China's cultural sector to adhere to the 'mass line' is crucial for the Party's ideological construction, and is also significant to China's national development, my following research (chapter Five and Six) will focus on how ordinary people have been portrayed and represented by China's television sector. My research will be closely related to the major success and frustrations of China's contemporary cultural policy

with regard to ideological work, and is also important for the protection and promotion of people's own cultures and life styles that are of great significance to China's regional and national development. Because the main focus of this thesis is on China's cultural policy and its implications on the cultural sector, the larger part of my empirical researches will be based upon interviews with cultural workers and government officials. The primary aim of chapter Five and Six is to examine the cultural sector's ability to generate and disseminate texts concerning people's lives and cultures as well as its ability to fulfil the Party-State's ideological agendas, rather than to investigate how the consumption of cultural products impact people's own lives and China's socialist economy.

China's cultural policy, however, is not limited to central Government's general ideological requirements for cultural works as I have discussed in this chapter, it also involves policies, regulations and laws concerning the institutional structure and arrangements as well as the censorship standards and procedures of the cultural sector to ensure the Party's stringent and consistent control is maintained (particularly when China's culture sphere is becoming increasingly commercialised). The development status and content production of China's culture, at the same time, is not only affected by central Governments' ideological agendas, but also by the institutional and censorship arrangements enforced by the Party-State. In the next chapter, I will provide a historical examination of the Chinese Government's construction of the cultural system, with a particular focus on the mass media and film sectors. In chapters Five and Six, I will move on to examine and analyse the development of China's television and film sectors under the influence of Government's cultural policy.

Chapter Four:

The Chinese Central Government's Construction of the Cultural System

As defined in the previous chapter, Government reform era change involved a strategic upgrading and consolidation of control over the cultural sphere so culture becomes a de facto medium of its political and ideological dominance. The complexification of official control has also emerged in tandem with the rapid commercialisation of the cultural sector, and so the Party's construction of 'socialist culture' became co-dependent on the economic competitiveness of China's cultural products, in general, and the competitiveness of those promoting the Party's ideologies, in particular. This chapter provides a further historical examination of the subsequent reforms of China's cultural system in the post-Mao era (particularly the reforms of the mass media and film sectors) so as to account for how the institutional arrangements of the cultural sector have evolved in direct accordance with central Government political management of the uneasy symbiosis of cultural development and market growth.

In China's post 1978 'reform era'⁸, central Government policy aims became inflected by a strategic pragmatism – economic development was articulated and framed by political priorities and yet allowing for a certain level of innovations, enterprise and expansion (that is, not subject to a 'command economy' control witnessed by the previous generation). And further, such pragmatism was registered in the cultural sphere not by a subsiding of

⁸ Marked by the start of 'China's reform and opening-up' in 1978, the post-1978 period is a widely recognized as historical period commonly referred to as 'China's reform era' or 'post-Mao China'.

Government interest, but rather a manifestation of an increasing adherence to political dominance in the ideological sphere. 'Cultural industries' (this term, as discussed later in this chapter, began to be frequently used by central Government in the early 2000s), as producers of both goods and services with a signifying power that is both cultural and social (and ultimately political), were always identified by state policymakers in terms of their economic and their ideological importance (indeed, as will unfold in this chapter – the 'cultural' and the 'ideological' are intimately related).

For Government to maintain a politically constructive synergy between the explicit economic and ideological policy functions of the cultural industries was a balancing act (in the sense that policy makers were routinely and over decades constructing and reconstructing its ideal cultural system through experiments, adaptations, modifications and strategic planning initiatives). As this chapter will serve to illustrate, though China's cultural system reform shares similarities with the nation's general economic reform (principally, with local experiments, innovations and informal arrangements playing a deceptively strategic role), the increasingly sophisticated institutions of central propaganda have been consistently rectifying and correcting local practices in order to eradicate informal arrangements that might disrupt central Government ideological hegemony. It has also been frequently issuing detailed national policies and regulations in order to maintain and consolidate the Party's leadership and control over the entire cultural sphere.

This chapter therefore constructs an historical account of China's cultural system reform since the 1980s, methodically aiming to identify and examine the policy mechanisms by which China's evolving political discourse integrated the interests of culture and ideology. Identified statements, policies

and strategy documents provide us with the spectrum of evolving official concerns that animated the structural changes in China's cultural sector. Before this, however, the chapter attends to the material-institutional conditions of policy – the functions and jurisdictions of the central Party administrative bodies who discharge the political management and regulation of China's cultural system⁹ (文化体制).

4.1 The structure and jurisdictions of the central cultural management system

The entire cultural system in China is a politically managed policy construct maintained under the bureaucratic purview of an institutionally-established propaganda regime. This reaches the inner sphere of central Government, and consists of Party and administrative organs whose responsibilities cover a wide scope ranging from policy making and implementation, administration and regulation to industrial promotion and censorship. At the executive register of this matrix of power is the Central Leading Group on Propaganda and Ideological Work (CLGPIW), which is an informal and highly opaque agency directly responsible for the systematic coordination of ideological, propaganda, cultural and media activities, as well as the dealing of significant events or crisis that involves the ideological field (General Office of the Central Propaganda Department, 1994: 122-123; Shambaugh, 2007: 31; Edney, 2014: 76). It has been a political convention that the head of the Group is one of the nation's most powerful figures – a member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the CPC. Under the Leading Group lies the real nerve center of

⁹. Policymakers in China tend to perceive governance from a systematic perspective. The cultural system, just like the economic system, the educational system, the technology system and the health system, refers to Party organs, governmental institutions, enterprises, laws and regulations that fall under a general domain (i.e., 'culture') of governance. The reform of the cultural system (or cultural system reform) refers to the institutional development of China's cultural system with the purpose of constructing a 'culturally powerful socialist country' (社会主义文化强国) (Luo, 2013, paragraph 1).

China's propaganda system – the Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China (the Central PD). As one of CPC's oldest internal divisions in charge of ideological-related work, the Central PD's core responsibilities include macro managing the content production of cultural and spiritual goods, putting forward guidelines for the development of ideological and cultural undertakings, directing the formulation of policies and regulations of the cultural system and appointing senior leaders of the propaganda system at central and provincial levels (The Organising Department of the Central Committee of the CPC, 2009: 63). According to Zhao (1998, 2008), Brady (2008) and Zhang (2011c), the Central PD is also directly responsible for the everyday management and censorship of the news sector in China¹⁰ (although as a Party institution steering the entire cultural and media sectors, it is not meant to engage in practical management such the implementation of policies, regulations and censorship and tends to delegate such tasks to administrative institutions under its guidance). Like CLGPIW, the Central PD is a highly secretive body whose exact organisational structure and everyday operations have remained enigmatic. Personal interviews and reviews of the CPC's publications conducted by Shambaugh (2007) and Brady (2008) reveal that it contains at least 200 personnel, one general office and five functional departments covering media, cultural, arts, publishing and educational spheres.

7. Empirical studies conducted by scholars have revealed some of the important means through which the propaganda system control the everyday operations of news agencies. Key measures include summoning key media gatekeepers (e.g., propaganda officials and chief editors) to receive up-to-date instructions (Zhao, 2008; Brady, 2008), sending instant propaganda orders to editor-in-chiefs (Zhao, 2008), and hiring 'news monitoring groups' in order to evaluate media units adherence to the Party's ideological guidance (Ford, 2015: 24; Brady, 2008).

Under the supervision of the Central PD are three key ministerial-level agencies affiliated to the State Council who are responsible for the practical administration of the cultural sector: Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), and the Ministry of Culture. Established in 2008 as a replacement of the former Ministry of Information Industry, MIIT's central task is to manage the technical aspects of communications such as the administration and regulation of telecommunication companies' service quality, network equipment and network information security (Chin, 2016: 119). With the strengthening of central Government's control over the Internet since 2008 (see Section 5), MIIT has also been frequently involved (along with SAPPRFT) in the regulation of online content. Created out of the former State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) and the Government Agency of Print and Publication (GAPP), SAPPRFT was formally established in 2013 and is mainly in charge of the content management of China's cultural sphere (Schneider, 2016: 197).

In broadcasting, press and film sectors, the list of SAPPRFT's functions and powers is comprehensive: it is responsible for the formulation and implementation of policies and regulations (often under the guidance of the central PD), approving the establishment and enforcing the closure of TV and radio stations, newspaper agencies, publication houses and film production companies, issuing and revoking the production permits for audio-visual programmes, administrating and regulating business access, operation and content security (Keane, 2015: 14; Chin, 2016: 119). The Ministry of Culture is mainly responsible for the 'non-media' sectors of the cultural sphere (although occasionally it is also involved in the regulation of the mass media), including everything from museums and cultural festivals to Internet cafes and karaoke

bars (The Ministry of Culture, 2016; Hu, 2017: 304). All advertising activities in China also fall under the purview of the Ministry of Culture (in concert with the State Administration for Industry and Commerce) (Brady, 2008). The Central PD, SAPPRFT and the Ministry of Culture all have their branches at provincial, municipal, and city levels (the branches of the propaganda department are also established within township-level Party committees), making the propaganda system omnipresent in China's cultural sector. Although regional propaganda systems have considerable autonomy in the management of local media and cultural sectors, their structures tend to be the reproduction of the central level and are obliged to obey orders from higher propaganda institutions (Schneider, 2016: 194).

The Television and Radio Department and the Film Bureau of SAPPRFT are in charge of the censorship of domestic and imported non-news TV programmes and cinematic works produced or circulated in China (The State Council, 2001; SARFT, 2004c). Within the department, the Television Censorship Committee is responsible for the post-production censorship of TV programmes (SARFT, 2010a). According to Chen (2017a), the committee contains around 20 to 35 staff including senior officials from SAPPRFT and central Party media units such as China Central Television (CCTV), *People's Daily* (人民日报) and China National Radio. For TV dramas that require further examination, a smaller committee especially in charge of drama censorship is also established within the same department. Like the TV programme committee, the latter also consists of officials affiliated to the central propaganda apparatus. The Film Examination Committee within the Film Bureau is responsible for the post-production censorship of films that are to be issued in China or domestically produced films to be sent abroad for festivals or other forms of exhibition (SAPPRFT, 2017).

According to an article published by SARFT, the committee is headed by the director and deputy directors of the Film Bureau and with around 30 other members consisting of central propaganda officials, judges from people's court, university professors and senior film directors. The Television and Radio Department and the Film Bureau are also responsible for the preliminary censorship as central regulations require all TV programmes and drama producers to submit an accurate abstract describing major themes and content, the names of directors and protagonists/hosts and all films containing 'significant events or sensitive issues' (重大事件和敏感问题) to submit themes, content, protagonists, producers, background and story-line to SARFT (SAPPRFT after 2013) for production approval (SARFT, 2011). With the rapid expansion of audio-visual products that are produced in China, SAPPRFT since the 21st Century has gradually delegated some of the *ex ante* and *ex post* examinations of 'normal works' to its provincial level branches.

For audio-visual products concerning 'significant political events or sensitive social issues' (according to SAPPERT (2017), these are works containing national security, social stability, diplomatic relations, ethnic minorities, religion, and military affairs, etc.), TV producers must first solicit approvals from relevant people's governments above the provincial level and then send their works to central SAPPRFT for censorship (SARFT, 2010a); films must go through a double-censorship procedure: SAPPRFTs at the provincial level are responsible for the preliminary examination and then send the works to the central TV department or Film Bureau for final approval (SARFT, 2010b).

Under the leadership and management of the central propaganda system, China has formed one of the most intricate and carefully planned cultural and

media environments in the world (Schneider, 2016: 189). Such an environment, of course, is not constructed by central Government in instant fashion but is a result of decades of experiments, adaptations and strategic planning. The sections that follow will provide an historical examination of the key policies, regulations and laws of central Government's cultural reform with particular attention to television, newspapers and the film industry. This aims to demonstrate how the institutional structure of China's cultural system has been transformed in accordance with a series of evolving political and economic requirements of central Government.

4.2 The transformation of China's cultural sector from the 1980s to the late 1990s – experimenting with commercialisation

When China embarked on the course of economic reform in the aftermath of the devastating Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), its cultural sector was badly in need of development. In 1978, the whole nation had only thirty-two TV stations and 186 newspapers (the numbers were thirty-two and 308 in 1960) (State Statistics Bureau, 2002: 758-760). From 1966 to 1976, all media units were required to fully devote their editorial efforts to 'class struggle', and as a result, not a single TV drama or TV series was produced and all newspapers were filled with reprinted articles from Xinhua News Agency (Huang and Xu, 1997b: 568; Latham, 2007: 114). Between 1966 and 1976, only seventy-six feature films were produced (less than 1/5 of the ones made between 1949 and 1965) and a great number of film studios and theaters were either dismantled or became derelict. In the late 1970s and early 1980s it was common for people to line up for several hours to acquire a ticket, as even some major cities were equipped with only one film theater (Shen, 2005: 202).

Nearly all existing cultural units in 1978 were deeply inflicted by financial deficit, yet central Government was unable to subsidise their usual operations, let alone to fund the expansion of the cultural sector and the development of new technologies (Zhao, 1998: 53). Under such difficult circumstances, China's cultural sector took on its experimental transformation towards commercialisation.

4.2.1 TV and newspaper: decentralisation and commercialisation

The Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Party (convened in December 1978) was a political turning point in China's history. The session officially adjudicated the shift of the CPC's central aim from class struggle to 'adjustment, rectification and improvement of the economy' (China Development Research Foundation, 2011: 123). Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, central Government decentralised its power over economic development in order to foster local autonomy, innovation and competition (Xu, 2011). In line with the Party's general reform strategy but also stressing the ideological role of the media, the then Minister of the central PD, Hu Yaobang, encouraged the media to be more innovative and proactive while consolidating the leadership of the Party at both central and local levels (The Central Propaganda Department, 1979: 3). He urged Party committees at lower government levels (i.e. provinces, municipalities, cities, county-level cities and counties) to establish newspapers to increase the flow of information for socialist economic construction and to strengthen the power of the propaganda apparatus (Esarey, 2005: 40). In 1983, the CPC Central Committee decided to carry out the policy of 'four-level management and development of television' (*四级办电视*), which officially allowed governments at provincial/municipal, city and county levels, to establish TV stations (Hong, 1998:94). Local governments were not only endowed with primary authority

over the daily operations of TV stations, but also the right to produce news reports (Esarey, 2005: 41).

The commercialisation of China's cultural sector began during the same period, but using a somewhat more 'bottom-up' method. In order to offset the increased cost of materials and the insufficient official funds, in 1978 eight central newspaper institutions put forward a joint proposal to China's central Government requesting permission to engage in economic activities under a new status called 'public undertakings managed as enterprises'. The proposal was later approved by the Central PD (Tu, 1999: 22-23). In January 1979, Shanghai's *Jiefang Daily* (解放日报) published the first commercial advertisement and this was soon followed by Shanghai TV Station. Three months later, the minister of the Central PD officially announced the validity of commercial activities in the media sector and permitted media units to place advertisements promoting both domestic and foreign products (Qian, 2010: 60-61). 'Public undertakings managed as market-oriented enterprise', a policy that assigned certain commercial autonomy to media outlets while retaining their ownership status, political stand and editorial principles, became the embryo of China's media system.

Central Government's policies encouraging the commercialisation and decentralisation of China's media units, undoubtedly, did not get passed without controversy and objections. When advertisements first appeared in Shanghai's *Jiefang Daily*, for example, there were waves of criticism from Chinese society accusing them of being a revival of capitalism (Qian, 2009: 60). Through Deng Xiaoping's economic pragmatism, however, a political consensus was eventually reached within China's ruling elites, that since central Government's subsidies were not substantially able to support the

expansion and modernisation of China's media sector, incentives of both local governments and media units should be harnessed in achieving these necessary tasks (Huang, 1993: 141-142). In order to maintain central control, two important policies were issued. Firstly, only Party committees and government institutions were allowed to establish, operate, manage and invest in TV stations, news agencies and newspapers. The establishment of such media units at all administrative levels had to be approved by relevant central Government institutions. Secondly, all TV stations had to carry mandatory live broadcasts from CCTV (the only central-level TV broadcaster) and all-Party papers at local levels were required to reprint key news reports and editorials from central Party organs (Zhao, 2014: 339).

4.2.2 The growth and chaos of the media industry

Central Government policies of commercialisation and decentralisation soon gave rise to the meteoric growth of China's media sector. From 1980 to 1999, the advertising revenue of China media industry surged from less than 100 million yuan to 29 billion yuan, with an average annual growth of 34.5% (Chang, 2003: 82). By the early 1990s, advertising began to surpass state subsidies as the major source of income for both sectors (Zhao, 2000). The crucial importance of media outlets in both revenue generation and local propaganda urged officials to zealously establish, in effect, media enterprises. From 1980 to 1995, the number of newspapers and TV channels multiplied, of which the vast majority were founded and managed at local levels (Huang and Zhou, 2003: 29; Zhou, 2009). What was equally significant for China's media sector, apart from the exponential growth of its size and revenue, was the 'bottom-up' reforms that took place when 'the markets' became a new master to serve. Under the auspices of local governments, various 'pro-market' transformations occurred in media outlets (particularly those in more

economically developed southeastern cities) before they were formally adopted, modified or eliminated by central Government.

While maintaining their official status as public institutions, media outlets started to take structural changes towards profit-oriented enterprises in order to fulfill the growing demands of the markets. By the early 1990s, the majority of central, provincial and city level newspapers and TV stations had established advertising departments, and advertising income was increasingly correlated to the wages and promotions of workers. Shanghai TV station, for example, initiated 'limited competition' between its five channels in the late 1980s, providing each channel with a certain extent of financial autonomy (proportional to its advertising income) for staff bonuses and equipment upgrade. It also downsized the allocation of its state-subsidy to the 'operational departments' (e.g. advertising, technical and logistics) and encouraged them to seek business opportunities in the society. In 1987, Shanghai TV became China's first media organisation to sign performance-based contract employees from the society (as opposed to the life-time employees in most of China's public institutions) (Li, 1992: 6-7). Zhejiang TV station established an advertising section under each of its four channels and started to outsource its commercial business to produce 'tailored advertisements' for enterprises in the early 1990s. It, like Shanghai TV, assigned revenue quotas to each of its channels in order to stimulate competition (Wang, 2011b).

In 1994, *Jinhua Daily* (a newspaper under Jinhua City Government) went a step further by spinning off its advertising, distribution and operational departments and co-establishing the Jinhua Communication Group with three private companies (Chen, 1999: 103). By the late 1990s, the separation of

business and operational activities from editorial departments were widely practiced by media outlets in southeastern cities in order to pursue economic profits in a more effective manner while retaining the content production (at least ostensibly) as 'non-market-oriented public service' (Dong, 2000: A1).

What went in tandem with the structural changes of media outlets towards commercially funded enterprises was the immense expansion of content delivered by TV screens and newspapers. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed rapid multiplication of channels and daily broadcasting hours of nearly all TV stations at central, provincial/municipal and city levels. CCTV, for example, added seven 'specialty channels' (专业频道) (ranging from finance to entertainment) to its original one channel (general) and increased its aired time from 40 hours a week to 138 hours a day between 1980 and 1995 (Grunde, 2002: 208). The Government's installation of cable networks in the early 1990s (in replacement of aerial services) also largely enhanced the reception capacity of television sets in China (Latham, 2007: 56).

By 1996, Chinese households on average could receive eight channels, and citizens in some big cities were able to choose from twenty channels on TV (Chin, 2016: 80). Unlike TV stations whose content expansion was largely limited to channels and programmes (central Government strictly controlled the number of TV stations within one administrative boundary), the decentralisation policy enabled local governments to establish newspapers apart from the existing Party organs. During the 1980s and 1990s, evening news, morning news, weekend editions and metro papers emerged and soon dominated the market. As the only organisations trusted by central Government to represent people's 'general interest', Party committees at central and local levels had the exclusive right to establish and operate such

commercially-oriented mass-appeal newspapers (Zhao, 2008).

Compared with the official organs at central and provincial levels that carry a large amount of mandatory propaganda content, these *tabloid-esque* papers (to use a Western reference point), primarily featuring entertainment, lifestyles and global news, soon gained the lion's share of China's newspaper industry. Without competition from private or foreign enterprises in the market, many mass appeal Party newspapers soon became business conglomerations with huge advertising revenue, multiple subsidiary papers, advertising and allocation companies, and invested assets in lucrative non-media businesses such as real estate, finance, tourism and hotels (Cao, 1999: 23; Chen and Li, 1998, cited in He, 2000: 113).

The commercialisation and decentralisation policies undoubtedly gave rise to the rapid growth and pro-market transformations of the media sector.

However, for central Government, the transformation was accompanied with chaos and even a direct threat to its control over China's cultural sphere.

Firstly, before the reform era, the status of media units was determined according to the administrative level of their sponsoring institutions. *The People's Daily*, for example, had a larger readership during Mao's era than all lower level newspapers, for it is under the sponsorship of the central PD and was subscribed by government units at all levels. The 'superiority' of higher level units over lower ones was crucial for the top-down ideological and political leadership before China's economic reform.

In the post-Mao era, the administrative structure was therefore maintained but with a shift in status whereby media outlets became politically significant with commercialisation. In broadcasting, the advertising income and audience

ratings (in regions covered by local stations) of many local level TV stations has outstripped their more politically constrained and centrally regulated provincial stations (Chen, 2007b: 1). In the press, mass-appeal newspapers at city and municipal levels, constituted five of the top ten newspapers nationally, by sales, in 1998.

The annual turnover of *Guangzhou Daily* (广州日报), the official paper of Guangzhou municipal Party committee, was more than three times that of *People's Daily*, and the purchase and subscription of the former were voluntary while the latter was largely dependent on mandatory subscriptions (Cao, 1999: 182). With commercially-oriented media outlets at lower levels gaining higher status in the market, the hierarchical structure of China's media system was severely disrupted. Secondly, as media became a major source of economic income, local governments, at city and township levels, became increasingly unwilling to obey the central policies that were detrimental to their own interests. The proliferation of media outlets throughout China and the power of 'local regimes' under China's economic decentralisation rendered it difficult for central Government to control local practice. Although (as mentioned above) local TV stations were required to transmit live broadcast from CCTV (including its advertisements), it was a common phenomenon that local stations either ignored this policy or purposely used low-quality transmitters when CCTV's programs were broadcast (Huang, 1993: 158). Many stations filled their channels with foreign films and entertainment programmes (mainly by playing pirated videotapes) in order to attract audiences and advertisements (Zhang and Yan, 1996: 25), a practice considered by central Government as instrumental to the 'peaceful evolution' to capitalism (Zhao, 1998: 169).

Thirdly, the development of the media sector was extremely uneven. As media units in more economically prosperous regions such as Shanghai, Guangdong, Zhejiang and Beijing spearheaded in market-oriented transformations, by the late 1990s the majority of media units in northwestern areas were still heavily dependent on local government subsidies (Chen, 1999: 105). The lack of market-oriented institutional changes of media outlets in China's underdeveloped regions in turn aggravated 'unregulated practices' and even defiance to central policies in their search for profits. In short, by the late-1990s, China's media sector was characterised by rapid growth and variegated local reforms, the loss of power of traditional Party organs in comparison with the rise of market-oriented media units, increasing competition between media units at various government levels, market fragmentation marked by territorial and administrative boundaries, and uneven development between prosperous and undeveloped areas.

4.2.3 The protracted reform of the film sector

In sharp contrast with the media sector that went through exponential growth and significant transformations since the 1980s, the reform of the film sector from the 1980s to 1990s was a sluggish process deeply inhibited by institutional inheritance. Under the planned economy, China's film sector was characterised by its centralised purchase and four-tier vertical distribution-exhibition system under which all films produced by studios were purchased *en bloc* by the China Film Distribution and Exhibition Company (hereafter referred to as China Film) at a fixed price (usually at 110% of a film's production cost). China Film then delivered the purchased film to distribution companies at provincial, city and county levels who in turn distributed it to local theaters (Meyer-Clement, 2015). All studios, distribution units and theaters (which were owned by distribution companies) were subordinated to

the governments at their respective administrative levels and were fully funded by the state (Su, 2016). In China's reform era, despite constant appeals from production studios requiring market-oriented transformation, the de-centralisation and commercialisation process that took place in TV and newspaper sectors did not occur in the film industry.

Blocked by prevalent vested interests and inhibited by central Government's unwillingness to relax its ideological restriction, the structure of the old institutions remained almost unchanged by 1992 (Shen, 2005: 223-225). The lack of impetus for production studios to produce saleable films (as their works were bought at fixed prices regardless of the ticket sales), the increasing cost of film production and the rise of cultural industries in other spheres like TV, music and videotapes soon drove China's film industry into a serious crisis. In 1986, 80% of all the domestic films released in China made a loss (Berry, 1991, 115). Since the mid-1980s, China's domestic film audience dwindled by around 5 million tickets a year (Su, 2016: 14). In 1992, the total domestic audience was only 36.1% of that in 1979 (Shen, 2005: 215).

The breakthrough of China's film sector came only after Deng Xiaoping's South China tour and the subsequent CPC 14th Party Congress in 1992 which stipulated the development of a market economy as the top priority of central Government. In January, 1993, *Several Opinions on Strengthening the Current Industrial Institution of Film* (Document No. 3) were issued by the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT, which was changed into SARFT in 1998), requiring the film sector to 'adapt to the construction of the socialist market economy system' (MRFT, 1993, paragraph 3). Key points of this document included: (i) Film production studios were allowed to market their films directly through local distribution units; and (ii) Local governments were

allowed to adjust ticket prices (on the basis of the central standard) according to the specific situation of local markets. Document No. 3 was considered a milestone in the reform of China's film sector, as it officially broke the central monopoly of China Film in both purchase and distribution. Film studios, however, still needed to face the monopolies of the local distribution system, particularly to negotiate with the 32 provincial units concerning profit-sharing, so that a film can be passed downwards to local theaters (Shen, 2005: 217). The curtailment of purchases of China's film was a fatal blow to films that did not sell in the market, as under the previous arrangement, a studio obtained around 1 million yuan return for each film regardless of the box office receipts (Li, 2008 in Meyer-Clement, 2015: 97).

In 1993, China's film sector declined drastically as many studios were unable to adapt to the 'sudden change' (Bai, 1995). When China's film industry was deeply mired in crisis, China Film (the only organisation with the authority to import films) announced central Government's decision to release ten 'high quality' foreign films annually. In 1995, ten Hollywood blockbusters entered China under a revenue sharing engagement between China Film and major American studios (Wan and Kraus, 2002: 424). Although Hollywood films soon attracted the audience back to the theaters and brought huge revenue to China's film sector, their success only further reflected the lack of competitiveness of Chinese domestic films.

In 1995 and 1996, all domestic films that were produced (around 100 each year) received in total only 30% of revenue generated by box-offices, while the other 70% were earned by the ten Hollywood imports (Zhang, 2008: 67). In 1998, *Titanic* earned a record-breaking 340 million yuan at the box office, equivalent to 25% of the revenue of the whole film industry that year (Huang &

Zhou, 2003: 306). From the mid-1990s to 2000, the prosperity of Hollywood imports and the revival of China's film revenue, as a whole, was accompanied by the continual decline of China's domestic films, both in production output and box office takings (Zhang, 2008). As Film critic Dai Jinhua declared in 1999: 'Like *Titanic*, the Chinese Film industry is sinking amid tender feelings and happiness, almost without any measure of resistance' (cited in Braester, 2011: 176).

4.2.4 Ideological control, organisational innovation and resistance

Comparing China's film industry reform in the 1980s and 1990s with that of the TV industry, Wang (2003a: 75) described it as 'completely lagging behind and having much to catch up on'. Indeed, apart from Document 3 and its follow-up policies aiming at breaking the central monopoly of China Film, there was a lack of significant policies coming from the center in support of the film sector as a whole. Like the TV and newspaper sectors, central Government's heavy ideological grip also gave rise to informal reforms and defiance to central policies in the film industry. Since the 1980s, increasingly more studios began to seek co-production with enterprises (both state-owned and private) and overseas companies in order to solicit investment, advanced technologies and creative input.

By the early 1990s, around one third of domestic film productions were co-produced (Chu, 2002: 49). Downsizing its subsidies to film studios since the mid-1980s, central Government officially acknowledged this practice in the mid-1990s under the requirement that all co-productions must be approved by MRFT (Kokas, 2017: 68). Many 'co-productions' in the 1980s and 1990s, however, only existed on paper as it was a common phenomenon that studios in financial trouble 'sold their studio's emblem' to overseas producers or

private domestic film companies in order to generate extra income (Meyer-Clement, 2015: 97). Although both the existence of private domestic film companies and such 'fake co-productions' were officially prohibited, except for occasional penalties, central Government acquiesced to such activities as films produced 'out of the system' still needed to be censored and distributed by the bureaucratic system if they wanted to be screened in China (ibid., 98).

The real 'threat', however, came from those films that went beyond the control of the state. Disappointed by the government's rigorous control and lacking commercial opportunities in China's ailing domestic film environment, many of the most talented young filmmakers (particularly the 'Sixth-Generation directors') went 'underground' and produced films with support from international arts foundations and film production companies (Zhang, 2010a: 48). Shot in China (many with borrowed equipment from state-owned studios) and produced overseas, these films tended to focus on the negative impacts of China's post-Mao social-economic transition and particularly the marginalised groups, such as migrant workers, prostitutes and homosexuals (Pratt and San, 2014: 118). A number of these films received rewards from international film festivals (such as Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards*, Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Blue Kite* and Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu*) before they were 'smuggled' back to China and became widely available as pirated videotapes and later via online downloading (Zhao and Keane, 2013: 728).

Outraged by the international fame and domestic circulation of these unauthorised films, the Chinese Government placed an official ban on seven 'underground' filmmakers (Zhangyuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, He Jianjun, Wu Wenguang, Shijian, Tian Zhuangzhuang and Ningdai) in 1994 and required all future post-productions to be completed in China (Li, 2009: 158). Such

sanctions further aggravated filmmakers' discontent with the system and some of them (such as Zhang Yuan and Wu Wenguang) continued their underground projects in the 21st Century (Meyer-Clement, 2015).

4.3 Re-centralisation and market consolidation – the cultural system reform from the late 1990s to 2003

The politically managed evolution of China's cultural system between the 1980s and the late 1990s was not primarily coordinated by fastidious planning from central Government. It was largely facilitated by reforms initiated by cultural units and local government, when a certain leeway was provided by the center in order to foster organisational and institutional transition. In the media sector, central Government decentralised its power to local governments and China's burgeoning markets at the beginning of the economic reform, due to severe funding restraint and the urgent need of its propaganda apparatus for modernisation and expansion. The resultant profit-oriented transition of media units, under China's administrative system, greatly reduced the need for state subsidies, enhanced government revenues and to some extent enriched Party propaganda by providing a more inclusive and up-to-date 'official culture' when orthodox socialist ideologies became increasingly irrelevant in the reform era (Barmé, 1999).

In the film sector, although central Government's conservation restrained institutional reforms until the mid-1990s, the co-production activities initiated by state-owned studios and the proliferation of domestic private film companies significantly changed the institutional arrangement inherited from the planned economy. For central Government, however, the reform of the cultural sector had also produced many unforeseen problems that were in dire need of resolution – problems such as market fragmentation created by

administrative and territorial boundaries, the resistance by local regimes and cultural workers against the central ideological control, the lack of economic efficiency and global competitiveness of China's cultural industries, and the disruption of the hierarchical structure of the cultural sector.

In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, apprehension grew among the ruling elites concerning the threats China's entry to the WTO would bring to its fledgling cultural sector. 'The coming wolves' and 'Trojan horses' became the buzz-phrases when foreign cultural enterprises were referred to by central Party organs (e.g. Ye, 2001: A1; Shi, 2000, A2). Since the late 1990s, the term 'national cultural security'¹¹ was coined by eminent Chinese scholars such as Hu Huilin from Shanghai Jiaotong University and Ye Lang from Peking University before the notion was officially endorsed by the central Party committee in the early 2000s (Keane, 2013: 28; Pang, 2012: 11). For central Government, the future development of its cultural policy was no longer a question concerning orthodox 'socialism' or 'capitalism' (as the debate went in the early 1980s) – the profit-oriented transformation of China's cultural sector was already regarded as an objective fact by both government officials and cultural workers (Zhao, 2000). The focus on its cultural policy, instead, was on how to construct China's own 'wolves and horses' that would compliantly follow the Party's commands, resist the 'negative' influence of foreign cultures and be able to compete with international giants such as Hollywood, CNN and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (Zhu and Robinson, 2012: 444).

As President Hu Jintao declared when addressing the Political Bureau of the

¹¹ According to Hu Huiqing, the director of National Center for Cultural Security and Ideological Construction, China's Academy of Social Science, China's national 'cultural security' primarily manifests itself in three aspects. First, the term highlights the significance of political culture and ideology. Second, it emphasises the protection of socialist institutions under the commercialisation of culture. Third, it stresses the protection and promotion of socialist culture and morality against consumerism (Zhao & Zhou, 2014).

CPC in 2003: 'We need to raise the flag of socialist culture high... We are determined to prevent fraudulent and regressive cultural ideas from corrupting the mind of our people, in order to guarantee our national cultural security and social stability' (quoted in Pang, 2012: 11). Deeply inspired and impressed by the influence and competitiveness of global cultural conglomerations and seeking to address the undesirable consequences of previous cultural system reforms, central Government embarked on its endeavors to build 'socialist cultural conglomerations' from the late 1990s.

4.3.1 The construction of newspaper and television conglomerates

In 1996, the *Guangzhou Daily*, the official organ of the Guangzhou municipal Party committee, was chosen by central Government to establish the first cultural conglomeration (i.e. Guangzhou Daily Group) in China. Following its 'success', nation-wide administrative campaigns were launched from 1996 to 2003 aiming to consolidate the power of Party newspapers, enhance the economic efficiency of the press sector and resume the hierarchical structure of China's propaganda system. Central and provincial Party organs, who were the core of China's newspaper groups, were provided with the golden opportunity to take over other types of papers (e.g. mass appeal, commercial, lifestyle and 'non-Party' papers sponsored by government departments) at central, provincial and city levels and form press groups. Economically unprofitable and politically unreliable papers at city levels and above, if refused to be taken over, were forced to be shut down (Zhao, 2008).

The vast majority of newspaper groups were constructed with the similar basic structure – they had one major Party organ at the top as the 'parent paper', and a large number of subsidiaries responsible for profit generation, market expansion and the provision of economic support to the parent paper

(Stockmann, 2013: 58). As stipulated by GAPP and the China Newspaper Association, the most important purpose of press groups was to 'enable Party organs to consolidate a powerful economic base through the market mechanism and ensure better fulfillment of the Party's propaganda objectives' (cited in Tan, 1997: 254). What went in tandem with the construction of conglomerates was the massive closing-down of newspapers below the city level in order to create market efficiency, further alleviate market fragmentation and enhance the dominance of high-level Party papers.

GAPP, who basically stopped approving the establishment of new newspapers in the mid-1990s (Stockmann, 2013: 56), ordered a closure of the majority of county-level newspapers in 2003. Apart from newspapers that were established before 1949, papers published by ethnic minority administrations and Party organs with advertising revenues of over 4 million yuan, all county-level papers were forced to be closed down (Zhao, 2008). By 2003, China had established 38 newspaper groups (four at central level, twenty-six at provincial/municipal level and eight at city level) and the total number of newspapers was reduced to almost the same level as that in 1986 (Tang, 2004: 110; Stockmann, 2013: 57).

In 1999, the State Council issued *Opinions on the Improvement of the Establishment and Management of Broadcasting and Television Networks* (Document No. 82), requiring the construction of broadcasting conglomerations at provincial and municipal levels (General Office of State Council, 1999). The document also called for, along with Document No. 37 issued earlier by the CPC Central Committee (1996), the elimination of TV stations and cable networks below the city level by incorporating them into the provincial and municipal level stations and networks. County TV stations were

no longer allowed to produce their own programming and were required to allocate most of their airtime to broadcasting provincial and central televisions' live programmes (Zhang, 2014a: 99; Esarey, 2005: 58).

The implementation of central Government's policies faced great resistance at local levels, as many county officials were unwilling to have their profitable TV stations and cable networks taken over by higher-level governments (Zhao, 2008). Overall, however, the re-centralisation project in favor of broadcasters at higher administrative levels was effective, and the total number of TV stations decreased dramatically from 880 in 1996 to 357 in 2001 (CCTV Year Book, cited in Zhang, 2014a: 99). In 2000, the first provincial level broadcasting conglomerate, Hunan Broadcasting System (formally known as the Golden Eagle Broadcasting System), was established in Hunan Province. It integrated three separate TV stations (Hunan TV, Hunan Cable TV and Hunan Economic TV) into a single conglomerate (Xiang, 2001: 5). One year later, the China Radio, Film and Television Group was constructed. This central level corporation combined CCTV, China national radio, and a great quantity of film production studios and distribution companies (Guo, 2003). By 2003, eighteen broadcasting conglomerates had been established, with one at central level, twelve at provincial/municipal level and five at city level (Tang, 2004: 111).

Apart from the establishment of broadcasting conglomerates, another crucial development that also elevated the competitiveness of provincial level TV stations was the launch of their own satellite channels. Before the 1990s, only four provinces (Xinjiang, Tibet, Yunnan and Guizhou) were allowed to own satellite TV channels because of the difficulty of building cable networks in rough terrains and the ideological requirement for TV signals to cover these

regions inhabited by most of China's ethnic minority population (Xiong, 2005a: 25). Due to the lack of competitiveness of their programming on the national scale, the existence of such channels never posed a challenge to CCTV and other local stations. In order to enhance the status of provincial TV stations and expand the reach of TV signals to rugged terrains in other provinces, central Government approved the establishment of one satellite channel for all provincial and municipal TV stations in 1997 (Jiang, 2009). By 1999, all provinces and municipal TV stations had sent their main TV channel through satellite-cable (Xiong, 2005a: 21). No longer constricted by their territorial boundaries, the ability of the satellite channels to cover the whole nation profoundly changed the development strategies of provincial TV stations and China's TV sector, as a whole. In the 21st century, the growth of provincial TV stations has completely outstripped that of TV stations at lower administrative levels, and the most successful of which (such as Hunan TV Station and Zhejiang TV Station) are even able to compete with CCTV in both economic revenues and audience ratings (discussed in Chapter Six).

4.3.2 The construction of film groups and theater chain systems

Like TV and newspaper sectors, 'heading towards big and strong' also became the official slogan of the film sector. It is particularly the case when China conceded to the US-China's WTO agreement to increase Hollywood imports from ten to twenty and allow foreign direct investments in its film industry (although the audiovisual sector was excluded from the WTO's General Agreement of Tariff and Trade) (Zhao, 2008). Confronting this 'precarious' situation, the Chinese central Government responded by significantly overhauling the institutional structure and pushing the whole industry towards 'managed market competition'. By borrowing directly from Hollywood, the Government aspired to construct a domestic film industry that

would compete head-on with the biggest foreign 'wolf'. As Xu Guangchun, the Vice Minister of the central PD, stated in the National Film Conference in 2001: "Under the condition of the socialist market economy, the film sector must win back the market, win back the audience in order to prosper" (quoted in Su, 2016: 31).

In 1997, the Film Bureau sent a delegation team to the United States in order to better learn from Hollywood's corporate and institutional arrangements. After visiting various film theaters and major corporations, like Universal, Disney and Warner Bro., the team submitted a report to SARFT and recommended the establishment of film conglomerates and trans-regional theater chains in China (China Film Year Book, 1999, cited in Su, 2016: 80). In 2001, central Government issued *Several Opinions on Carrying out Further Reforms in the Film Industry* (Document 320), which urged the construction of economically-competitive film conglomerates with complete industrial chains that integrate film production, distribution and exhibition. It also required the assurance of the Party's leadership and the 'socialist nature' of film conglomerates by having Party secretaries sitting on the board of directors and/or serving as the legal representative (SARFT and The Ministry of Culture, 2001).

Between 2001 and 2003, four regional film groups were established in Shanghai, Beijing, Changchun and Xi'an (in 2008, two more groups were formed in Chengdu and Guangzhou). Taking over a large number of distribution companies (including their theaters) and film studios, these new conglomerates were not only created as entities of scale but were also an important means to break the regional monopolies that had inhibited the development of China's film sector for over two decades. These new state-

owned and city-based conglomerates had also shed their former administrative affiliations and were allowed to distribute and invest in films nationally (Zhang, 2010a). In 1999, the China Film Group Corporation (CFG) was constructed. This central conglomeration integrated eight powerful state-owned media corporations, such as China Film, China Film Co-production Corporation and Beijing Film Studio, and became 'the most comprehensive and extensive state-owned film enterprise in China with the most complete industry chain that facilitates film production, distribution and exhibition' (PR Newswire Asia, 2007, cited in Zhu & Robinson, 2012: 432). In 2003, Huaxia Film Group – another state-owned film conglomerate was formed as the second central level company that competes with CFG (Han, 2016: 754). Since 2003, CFG and Huaxia have been the two enterprises that monopolise the imports and distribution of foreign films, and two of the most dominant distributors and producers (particularly the CFG) of domestic films in China.

The re-centralisation campaign was not limited to the construction of film groups. Deeply inspired by Hollywood's business model, central Government was determined to build a nation-wide theater chain system in order to further break local monopolies and create the 'vertically integrated power' of China's film sector (Wan and Kraus, 2002: 420). In 2001, SARFT and the Ministry of Culture jointly issued Document 1519, which demanded the construction of one-level theater chains and the elimination of the multiple level distribution-exhibition system.¹² It required one or two theater chains to be established in each province and big city before October 2002 and encouraged the construction of trans-regional theater chains. It stipulated that regions that failed to accomplish this task would be denied any access to the revenue-

¹² Film studio and distribution companies, therefore, could directly approach theater chains for exhibition, rather than to negotiate with the numerable local distribution companies that had monopolized local markets.

sharing of imported films (SARFT and the Ministry of culture, 2001b).

Document 1519 and the aforementioned Document 320 also approved the shareholding and establishment of both theater chains and film distribution companies by domestic private capital. Under the US-China WTO agreement, up to 49% of shareholding by foreign investors was also allowed in operating theaters, but the distribution sector was strictly off-limits to foreign investment (SARFT and the Ministry of culture, 2001). The period between 2001 and 2003 witnessed the provincial and city governments' strenuous push for the integration of existing distribution companies and their theaters as well as the setting-up of new theater chains across China (Shen, 2004). By 2003, thirty-five theater chains had been established in twenty-five provinces and cities, containing 1106 theaters and 2197 screens (Su, 2016: 83).

4.3.3 The establishment of the fundamental logic of China's cultural system

The cultural system reforms, launched by central Government between the late 1990s and 2003, were ones with consequential influence. While addressing problems such as market fragmentation, the lack of economic efficiency and economies of scale, it also gave rise to the fundamental institutional arrangement of China's culture sector that aligns political status with commercial competitiveness. In the newspaper sector, the restructuring of commercially profitable papers into the subsidiaries of Party organs turned the 'threat' of mass-appeal papers into the power and status of press groups with Party papers lying at the core. In broadcasting, the integration of TV stations into central and provincial conglomerates and the transformation of lower level stations into the 'transmitters' of higher level ones, substantially enhanced the latter's audience coverage, advertising revenue and general influence (Zhou, 2009).

By gaining access to national audiences and advertisers, provincial stations further consolidated their advantageous status (especially over city level ones) through the establishment of satellite channels. In the film sector, the upwards integration of theaters, distribution companies and production studios, not only broke local monopolies but also created a number of powerful state-owned film conglomerates and theater chains at provincial and city levels. The biggest economic 'privilege', however, was preserved for the two central level groups with the exclusive right to import and distribute imported films (Meyer-Clement, 2015: 105). For the ruling elites in China, when cultural units with political importance gaining economic dominance in the marketplace, the 'ideal' shape of China's cultural system was established.

The cultural system reform during this period also significantly reduced the likelihood of local defiance against central control. In the mass media sector, although TV stations and newspapers had always been affiliated with governments at all levels, 'irregular practices' were widespread before the late 1990s. China's economic decentralisation and the concomitant one-rank down cadre appointment system¹³ were the major reasons behind such defiance. Under such arrangements, the central control over lower administrative units (particularly those below the city level) is relatively weak and 'local protectionism' against central Government's economic, social and environmental policies has been rampant in towns and villages (Peng, 2004; Chow, 2015: 228; Shapiro, 2016). With the transition of TV stations and newspapers from propaganda tools into lucrative profit generators, the

¹³ In the reform era, local governments are endowed with a great extent of autonomy and independence in managing local affairs, and the appointments, promotions and dismissals of the Party cadres/government officials below the provincial level are not the central Government's responsibility but are controlled by the Party/government leaders who are one rank above (Zheng, 2007: 61; Herrmann-Pillath, 2016: 330).

reluctance of local leaders to accept cultural policies that were hostile to their own economic interests was hardly surprising.

The nation-wide campaigns since the 1990s, however, almost entirely eliminated media outlets (or stripped away their rights to produce self-made content) below the city level and gave rise to media conglomerates under the leadership of central, provincial/municipal and city governments. As a crucial arrangement enforced by the center, all media conglomerates, since the campaigns, are under the direct leadership of Party committees (rather than other government departments) and have, either the head of the propaganda department or the head of SARFT/GAPP from their administrative region, serving as the chairman or sitting on the board of directors (Zhao, 2008; Chen, 2007b: 114). Party committees at the media units' administrative regions have the right to appoint leading officials and managers, control major decision making, control the allocation of capital, and enforce censorship (Lin, 2006: 54). With the majority of media conglomerates (i.e. those at central, provincial and municipal levels) being under the strict control of Party officials directly appointed by the central propaganda system, and the other ones (those at city levels) being controlled by Party officials in China's major cities, the media outlets' defiance against central leadership became extremely unlikely.

In the film sector, joint-ventures were allowed in theater operations by both foreign corporations (with up to 49% of shareholding) and domestic private enterprises. In another important development of central policies, the Government, in 2001, officially permitted two types of widespread practice in the film sector – co-productions and independent film production by domestic companies (both, however, were required to apply for a film production permit

issued by SARFT for every film produced) (The State Council, 2001). After 2003, domestic private companies with a film production permit (single film) were also allowed to co-produce films with foreign corporations (SARFT, 2003). Officially allowing the entry of 'non-state' capital, technology transfer and human talents, into film production and exhibition, central Government intended to utilise all available resources for the development of the domestic film industry (Wang, 2003b: 66).

Central Government's control over the film sector, however, remained intact as the state still dominated in the distribution sector that determines which films are delivered to theaters and the release schedule of films (not to mention the central censorship system that controls which films are allowed to be produced and issued in China). The official allowance of non-state enterprises in the film market was accompanied by the strengthening of regulations against activities that defy Government policies. In 2001, for example, the State Council issued Film Managerial Regulations and stipulated that any individuals or film studios that engage in unauthorised alliance with overseas enterprises in film production, distribution or importation will be penalized up to 300,000 yuan; and any individual who participates in foreign festivals without central authorisation will be banned from the film business for five years (Su, 2016: 33). The consolidation of Government regulations, along with the soaring growth of China's film industry since the mid-2000s (see the next Section), drove increasingly more 'underground' filmmakers to return to the 'system' to produce commercially-oriented films.

4.4 The continual promotion of state-owned cultural industries: cultural system reforms between 2003 and 2008

The late 1990s and the early 2000s saw the emergence of international

academic and policy discourses around cultural/creative industries as a significant component of national development strategy in countries across the world. In 1998, the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) re-branded an existing minor policy framework of 'cultural industries' as 'creative industries', which, had and was contributing to measurable economic growth, and consisting of thirteen sectors that ranged from television to software, and contributing to 5% of the total national income (DCMS, 1998).

The 'cultural' and 'creative' industries soon became terminologically synonymous and economically interdependent in ways that were never explained. As an international example, however, it was clear that as export leader with increasing soft power, the UK was providing policy templates for national and regional governments around the world (Kong, Gibson, Khoo and Semple, 2006; O'Connor, 2010). Such policy templates were discernible in China during the late 1990s, and Chinese scholars have, since then, identified an increasing political legitimization of this emerging industry. Among such scholars, leading professors from renowned academic institutions in Beijing and Shanghai, such as Li Wuwei, Jin Yuanpu, Ye Lang and Hu Huilin (the latter two have been frequently solicited by China's ruling elites in the development of national cultural policies) have all lamented the lack of global competitiveness of China's cultural industries, despite the nation's significant cultural resources (Ye, 2002). They also identify severe threats to China's 'cultural security' and traditional values posed by consumers' heavy dependence on Western cultural products (Hu, 2000), and the importance of cultural industries from China's GDP growth and the upgrade of China's economic structure (Jin, 1998), and also the contribution cultural industries could make to extricate China from its 'high-consumption, high-pollution and

low-efficiency' growth-mode – towards the development of a more sustainable economy (Li, 1999: 34).

International examples and influence (particularly that from the UK, South Korea and Hong Kong) and the above concerns raised by China's leading experts, were twin forces at work in central Government's decision-making in adopting culture and creativity as national development policies. There was also another factor: the institutional organisation as defined above, where the core cultural sectors were configured in a way that almost guaranteed both productivity and ideological conformity. As globalisation became more apparent in the 1990s, this system (and centralised systemic planning nationally) became less responsive to rapid change, and where state-owned cultural enterprises were increasingly suffering from bureaucracy, lack of managerial autonomy, and financial stimulation, and employees' clinging to life-long positions (Ye, 2003).

In addition, the development of the cultural system as a whole was resistant to the rapid growth of a domestic private cultural sector and contributions from foreign cultural enterprises – both of which had already become significant forces of China's cultural sector and indispensable resources for the growth of state-owned cultural units. The activities of both, however, should have been clearly defined in a way that would not disrupt the ideological leadership of central Government. As Liu Yunshan, the then Minister of the Central PD, emphasised, in his 2002 article published on the CPC's core theoretical journal *Research on Party Building* (党建研究): 'Cultural system reform in the new situation should focus on the strengthening and improvement of the Party leadership, the transformation of the mode of business operations and management, the establishment of a sound cultural market system and the

strategic opening of the Chinese market under the principle of taking the outside resources 'for our own use (为我所用)' (Liu, 2002: 32).

From 2003 to 2008, China's cultural system reforms (especially those in the TV, newspaper and film sectors) so progressed around four main themes: (i) the promotion of China's cultural industries, as a whole; (ii) the further consolidation and market expansion of the state-owned cultural sector; (iii) the legitimisation of formerly existing 'informal' status and practices of domestic cultural enterprises; and (iv) the setting of clear boundaries for domestic private and foreign enterprises, selectively incorporating them into China's hierarchical administrative structure.

In his report to the 16th CPC National Congress in 2002, President Jiang Zemin officially announced a central Government decision to promote cultural industries. His speech gave unprecedented attention to the significance of cultural system reform and emphasised the importance of culture, economy and politics as three interrelated pillars of China's 'comprehensive national strength' (综合国力). According to Jiang (2002), 'Developing cultural industries is an important means to prosper socialist culture and satisfy people's spiritual and cultural needs under the market economy' and an important way to 'enhance the overall national power' (Jiang, 2002, paragraph 7). As a crucial step in China's cultural system reform, central Government divided the cultural sector into cultural undertakings (文化事业) and cultural industries (文化产业).

The separation officially divested the majority of China's cultural institutions of their 'public service' responsibilities and defined their market-oriented nature. Cultural undertakings, on the other hand, are non-market oriented and are 'cultural services provided by central and local governments aiming at

ensuring citizens' basic cultural rights and satisfying their basic spiritual needs', which (apart from certain mass media units and sectors) mainly include public libraries, museums and galleries and cultural communities (Xie, 2008: 98).

4.4.1 The construction of state-owned enterprises and the official boundaries of non-state capital in the media sector

The bifurcation between cultural industries and cultural 'undertakings' had profound implications on the reforms of the mass media sector. As key components of central Government's promotion strategy of state-owned cultural units, SARFT (2003) and GAPP (2004) issued *The Implementation Plan for the Experimental Work of Press and Publications Reforms* and *The Implementation Plan for the Experimental Work of Radio and Television* in 2003. These two documents, along with their follow-up 'non-experimental' documents that applied to all media units issued three years later (SARFT, 2006, GAPP, 2006), delineated in detail the central requirements for the reforms of the media sector.

Firstly, major Party news agencies and newspapers at central and provincial levels, such as the *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily* and the Xinhua News Agency, would keep their status as public undertakings and continue to serve their primary role as the Party's official mouthpiece and upholders of 'public interests'. Secondly, all radio and television units would maintain their status as public undertakings while they were permitted to separate their operational and business units into market-oriented state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Their subordinated channels (e.g. sports, commercial, traffic, science and entertainment) that do not cover 'current political affairs' (时政新闻) were also allowed to be spun off into SOEs. Thirdly, leading Party organs of newspaper

groups and newspapers covering current political affairs would retain their editorial units as public undertakings and were allowed to spin off their operational departments into SOEs.

The subsidiaries of leading Party newspapers could also transform into market-oriented state-owned enterprises with the government's permission. In order to ensure the 'four unchanged', namely, 'the media's nature as the mouthpiece of the Party and people cannot be changed, Party control of media cannot be changed, the Party's leadership over officials cannot be changed, insistence on correct public opinion cannot be changed.' (Zhu, 2002, cited in Chin, 2017: 97), all transformed media units were required to be under the direct leadership of Party committees and have government-assigned Party carders serve as the top manager and/or sit on the board of directors.

Although media units, as public undertakings, had been allowed to take profit-oriented transformation since the start of China's economic reform and the separation between business operation and content-production was initiated by some media units as early as the 1980s, the central policies, since 2003, officially defined the vast majority of media outlets as cultural industries and literally forced all outlets (and their departments), that were subsumed under the category, to transform into market enterprises by excluding them from government subsidies. Central Government not only provided general guidance with regards to organisation structure, modes of operation and management, disposition of assets and personnel replacement, but also offered immense support with tax and bank loan preferences (the transformed media SOEs, for example, were exempt from paying corporate income tax and housing property tax until 2018; Party organs that were transformed into SOEs were further exempt from the value-added tax generated from their

distribution and publication businesses) (GAPP, 2004; 2006, SARFT, 2006).

Strenuously pushing its media units towards the market, Government intended to further enhance their domestic market dominance and global competitiveness through streamlining operational structures, improving managerial autonomy and by allowing them to absorb private capital through joint ventures, private investment and stock market listings (Zhao, 2008). The demarcation of cultural industries from public undertaking by media outlets' right to cover current political affairs was also consequential as it officially excluded any involvement of private capital in the production of content that is related to government activities and significant social events. As will be discussed in Chapter Five and Six, this demarcation significantly shapes the landscape of China's television sector.

Following the release of the promotion plans for state-owned media units, central Government issued *Several Decisions on Access of Non-public Capital to Cultural Industries by the State Council* in May 2005 (Document 10) (the State Council, 2005a). Document 10, along with Document 34 issued by SARFT (2004a) and Document 19 issued by the State Council (2005b), defined the official boundaries for the involvement of non-state capital in the mass media sector. Firstly, domestic private TV programme and drama production companies, being an important chain of China's TV industry since the 1990s (Yao, 2014b: 34), were officially acknowledged. Domestic enterprises, with a minimum registered capital of three million yuan and with an Operating Permit for Radio and Television Programme issued by SARFT, are allowed to produce TV programmes¹⁴. Foreign companies are forbidden

¹⁴ To produce TV dramas, apart from the Operating Permit for Radio and Television Programme, private domestic companies also need to apply for Television Drama Production Permit issued by SARFT.

from establishing independent TV production entities in China, but are allowed to co-produce joint programmes and dramas in the form of contributing capital and providing creative personnel. For all co-produced works, SARFT's approval is mandatory, no less than one third of the key personal (e.g. scriptwriters, directors, and key actors) should be from China and all or some scenes are required to be filmed in China. Secondly, private capital from both China and overseas is permitted to enter the distribution, publication and advertising businesses of the mass media sector. The investment of foreign capital in these business sectors of Party newspapers and TV stations needs to be approved by the relevant departments of the State Council and the Central PD. Only domestic private capital is allowed to invest in TV channels that do not cover current political affairs. All joint-ventures required at least 51% of state-owned capital and non-state shareholders are forbidden to be involved in the management and decision-making process of their invested enterprises. Thirdly, non-state capital is strictly prohibited from establishing or investing in news agencies, the public undertaking sector of newspapers, broadcasting and TV stations, TV and radio emission stations, relay stations and broadcasting satellites.

In 2003 and 2008, the General Office of the State Council, the Central Propaganda Department, and another eleven central Government departments, jointly formulated and issued Document 15 and Document 114, requiring the vast majority of China's cultural undertakings, in all sectors to transform into market-oriented SOEs. Like the aforementioned policies, pushing media units towards market-oriented transformations, these two documents offered general guidance with regard to assets and personnel arrangements, and organisational and operational changes. Governments at all levels were required to provide preferential policies in the forms of tax

exemption and bank loans as well as other forms of financial support during the transition (General Office of the State Council, 2003; 2008). In 2004, SARFT issued *Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Film Industry* (Document 41), which officially defined the film sector as a cultural industry and the nature of film production, distribution and exhibition entities as market-oriented activities.

The document further urged the continual construction of a nation-wide theater chain system and the transformation of state-owned film units and particularly major conglomerates such as CFG, Huaxia Film and Shanghai Film Group into 'large and modern film enterprises with global competitiveness' (SARFT, 2004b). In order to further enhance the market competitiveness of the state-owned film sector, in 2004, central Government permitted foreign investment in Chinese film production companies (as discussed above, foreign capital before 2003 was only allowed to enter theater chains and co-produce individual films) under the condition that foreign corporations could only form joint ventures with state-owned film enterprises and all joint-ventures be approved by the State Council. All non-state investors in state-owned production enterprises could own up to 49% of shareholdings and were forbidden to be involved in major decision-making such as the appointment of senior managers, capital allocation and censorship enforcement (SARFT and the Ministry of Culture, 2004).

Apart from the strategic promotion of the state-owned sector, central Government took efforts to seek reconciliations with the 'disobedient' filmmakers and amend its censorship procedures in order to boost the domestic film industry and eliminate film-making activities that were independent from the political system. In November 2003, the Minister of

SARFT Tong Gang and several high-ranking central Film Bureau officers invited more than 30 independent film makers (including the majority of the 'Six-Generation directors') to participate in an informal meeting. Tong Gang expressed the Film Bureau's hope to make a new start with the filmmakers by supporting their future films produced within the 'system', lifting some of the bans that had been imposed on their previous works and bringing them to theaters (Southcn.com, 2004).

The film officers also informed the filmmakers that it would simplify the censorship system for the convenience of film producers and directors (Li, 2009: 160). In July 2004, SARFT issued Document 30 and amended its censorship procedures. Since the release of the document, all film production companies only needed to submit a script abstract (剧情梗概) with a minimum of 1000 words when applying for permission for production (before 2004, an entire screen play was required for project approval), and film bureau officials were required to provide a formal reply (with approval or disapproval) along with detailed opinions to film makers within 20 working days (before this policy, filmmakers sometimes needed to wait for months before they could receive an answer) (SARFT, 2004c; Meyer-Clement, 2015: 164-165). Without changing the censorship criteria, these seemingly minor modifications of pre-production censorship procedures greatly simplified the application process and significantly enhanced the willingness of film producers to submit projects to the film bureau (Meyer-Clement, 2015: 165).

4.4.2 The strengthening of the fundamental logic of China's cultural sector and the incorporation of the 'non-state' capital

As argued above in Section 4.3, the cultural system reform from 1998 to 2003 established the structural-institutional arrangement for China's cultural sector

(particularly in TV, newspaper and film industries), which in policy terms aligned political status with economic power, cultural production and ideological adherence. Central Government's cultural industry promotion strategies between 2003 and 2008 continued to put overwhelming emphasis on the development of the state-owned cultural enterprises with the aim of further enhancing their domestic dominance and global competitiveness. While pushing state-owned TV, newspaper and film units towards market-oriented transformations and allowing them to absorb outside capital, technological and human input, the Party-State maintained its ideological control by retaining the Party's leadership and excluding non-state capital from major decision making.

The official acknowledgment of formerly existing 'informal' status and activities of non-state enterprises was another important step taken by central Government to promote China's cultural sector (particularly that of the state-owned enterprises) and to further formalise its institutional structure. In the TV sector, the legitimisation of domestic private programme and drama production companies enhanced the sense of security of existing entrepreneurs who had already been in the business (some of them for over a decade) and attracted other enterprises to invest in this burgeoning industry (Liu, 2010: 56).

Initially keeping a tight grip on the release of production permits in order to create market share for the newly transformed state-owned production enterprises, central Government started to allow more private companies to obtain official licenses since 2005. By 2008, there were 1714 cultural units with Operating Permits for Radio and Television Programmes and around 80% of them were private enterprises (Pan, 2016: 84). The growth of the

private production companies was crucial for the development of state-owned TV stations whose market transformation and channel expansion significantly enhanced their needs for cultural content. By officially allowing non-state actors to enter the official system, while strictly prohibiting them from becoming involved in the management or operations of TV stations (see Section 4.4.1, above), central Government also successfully incorporated private capital into the very bottom of the political hierarchy of China's TV sector and ensured their ideological obedience. Private companies, whose broadcasting platforms (i.e. TV channels) are monopolised by state-owned organisations, are also subject to the censorship imposed by TV stations at all administrative levels. As stipulated by SARFT (2005), TV stations should 'firmly grasp' their control over all channels and implement their censorship rights over all broadcast programmes (paragraph 4).

Without the political protection enjoyed by state-owned enterprises and being subordinated to TV stations, Chinese private enterprises are known for their political timidity and tend to veer away from cultural content deemed ideologically sensitive. As Li Xin and Wang Jifang remarked in their book *A Report on the Current Condition of China's Private TV companies*: 'These private TV workers, both economically and politically, have to act extremely cautiously as if they are constantly walking on thin ice' (Li & Wang, 2002: 28).

Film companies that are owned by private capital in China, with their access to production, distribution (of domestic films) and theater operations, enjoy a more 'equal' position in the market when compared with their TV counterparts. Indeed, the aforementioned central policies, issued in the early 2000s (see Section 4.4.1), served as a strong boost to the development of China's private film sector. In 2004, over 80% of all domestic films were funded solely or

partly by private investment (Chen and Xian, 2014: 38). In 2007, eight of the top ten Chinese films, in terms of box office receipts, had investment from private companies (ibid, 2014: 40). Among them were big names like Huayi Brothers, Boli Bona and New Picture, which had not only become major players of China's film industry with their own production studios, theater chains, distribution companies and entertainment agencies, but also significant forces in the cultural sector as a whole with invested capital in such areas as TV, magazine and online entertainment.

The rapid growth of the private film sector, in turn, contributed to the development of the state-owned film sector, since more and more major private film companies chose to invest in and/or co-produce films with state-owned enterprises, in order to share their exclusive rights in distributing imported films, their long-term relations with foreign corporations, as well as their powerful distribution companies and close connections with film bureau officials. The close cooperation between the state-owned and non-state sectors further enhanced the connection between the Chinese Government and private film companies, and one notable result of this is the increasingly proactive participation of private film companies in the production of propaganda films (Peng, 2013).

In the 21st Century, an increasingly number of filmmakers who went 'underground' during the 1990s, emerged to make commercially-oriented and even propaganda works (Wang, 2004; Liu, 2013: 212). The consolidation of regulations against film productions that are independent from the state (see Section 4.3.3, above) undoubtedly contributed to the decrease of defiance against central Government policies. But what made political penalties more costly, and what entices filmmakers to 'return to the system', was the meteoric

growth of China's domestic film sector since the mid-2000s and central Government's simplification of the censorship process that provide filmmakers with the creative opportunities, economic interests and personal fame the sector was unable to provide in the 1990s (Pickowicz, 2011: 325-332). Largely because of the Government's reform policies, the once-crumbling film market went through a remarkable revival since 2004, with a growth-rate four or five times higher than that of the national GDP growth. By 2013 China had become the world's second largest film market, with total box office revenues of US\$ 3.6 billion (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, cited in Vlassis, 2016: 484). In 2003, the box office earnings of domestic films for the first time overtook that of imported ones, and by 2008, 61% of box-office revenues were generated by domestic works (Liao, 2008).

As the leading Sixth Generation director, Jia Zhangke, stated about the lift of his official ban immediately after the above-mentioned meeting with Film Bureau officials: 'I really welcome and feel extremely excited about the Film Bureau's decision... Compared with before, we filmmakers today have much better conditions for creations and many more guarantees for economic support. I therefore hope to make better films in the future' (cited in Wang, 2004: 8).

4.5 The promotion of China's cultural industries – cultural system reform since 2008

From 2004 to 2008, the number of cultural enterprises increased by 52% and accounted for 97.9% of all registered legal units in the cultural sector (the proportion of public undertakings represented only 0.8% by the end of 2008) (State Statistics Bureau, 2010; Hong, 2014: 617). Upon the general completion of the status transition of state-owned cultural units, in July 2009 central Government released the *Cultural Industry Promotion Plan* (The State

Council, 2009).

The policy orientation of this document involves: (i) explicit acknowledgment of past achievements with regard to the transition of state-owned cultural units to market competitive modern enterprises; special mention was given to the mass media sector and the need for further Government support for TV stations and newspapers at central and provincial levels. State-owned mass media units were also urged to expand their businesses on the Internet, smart phones, digital television and social media, in order to enhance their market share in the digital sphere. (ii) The construction of a 'modern cultural market system', which, among the requirements for other sectors, included the further integration of TV networks and the construction of national digitised cable networks, and the further construction of inter-regional film theater chains (particularly digital theater chains). (iii) The promotion of the entry of private enterprises and capital into the cultural sectors, permitted by central Government, through such means as the simplification of official approval procedures and the support for private venture capital. (iv) The construction of cultural clusters and parks. (v) The promotion of cultural exports, particularly in such sectors as film, TV drama and programmes, online games, animation, publication and exhibition. (vi) The enhancement of the national copyright system. (vii) The cultivation of human capital through the reforms of the university educational system and the establishment of other training facilities.

March 2011 saw the issuing of the *Outline of the 12th National Five-year Plan*.

This central Government guiding document, providing national social and economic development initiatives from 2011 to 2015, officially put forward the national strategy to 'promote cultural industries into the pillar industry in the national economy' and 'develop cultural industries with public ownership as

the main form and diverse ownerships developing comprehensively' (The State Council, 2011). Following central Government's general framework, by 2013 nearly all provinces and major cities had put forward their own cultural/creative industries promotion plans according to the specific priorities of local development strategies and the development status of cultural industries within their territorial boundaries (Ye,2014).

4.5.1 Expanding the traditional media to the digital area

In light of the rapid rise of the Internet, the expansion of the administrative structure and the fundamental logic of China's mass media sector to the digital sphere became a core central Government concern. In his speech of August 2014, at the newly established central policy formulation body – Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms (CLGCCR) – President Xi Jinping highlighted the importance of extending the Party's ideological system to the Internet, by 'making efforts to create a batch of new mainstream media units and several new media conglomerates with powerful communication capacities, public credibility and influence, and to establish a diversified and integrated modern communication system' (People.cn, paragraph 2). After the conference, CLGCCR (2015) issued *Guiding Opinions for the Converged Development of Traditional Media and New Media* (Document 32), making 2014 the 'first year of media convergence' of China's cultural system reform (Tang, Huang and Liu, 2017: 11).

Document 32 highlighted the importance of new media as a rapidly growing major ideological field for the Party in propaganda and thought work, public opinion guidance and national security, and urged media units to explore integrated development between traditional and new forms of communication in content, channels, operations and management. It acclaimed central TV

stations' and newspapers' utilisation of websites, microblogs and WeChat, etc. in reporting central Party events and required the further takings of advanced communication channels in content construction. To support the digital expansion of the traditional media sector, the document required governments at all levels to enhance financial support, project subsidies and promote the cross-industrial and cross-media merger and reorganisation of state-owned media units. In August 2013, SARFT issued *Opinions on Facilitating Mainstream Media's Development of Online Radio and Television*, which urged the TV stations at central, provincial and city levels to expand their market share on the Internet in order to establish the mainstream position of state-owned TV units in the digital sphere, within three to five years. It required radio and television administrative departments, at all levels, to strive for the position of television convergence in local government key development strategies and the television sector as a key beneficiary of government support for cultural industries (SARFT, 2013).

What went in tandem with central Government's support for the expansion of the traditional media sector to the new media (along with its administrative structure), was the nation-wide campaigns aiming at eliminating the content and institutional arrangements of the Internet sector that fell outside the system. In December 2007, SARFT and the newly established MIIT jointly issued Document 56 and stipulated that, from January 1st, 2008, only websites with the License for Dissemination of Audio-Visual Programs through the Information Network would be allowed to operate audio-visual programs or channels.

To acquire the license, a unit had to be a 'legal person, fully state-owned or state ownership-controlled, with no law-breaking records during the past three

years'. Enterprises with foreign shareholdings were not allowed to apply for the permit. Private enterprises that had already existed before 2008 were required to obtain the official license immediately or be shut down (SARFT and MITT, 2007). The release of the document radically changed China's Internet landscape as it officially prohibited the establishment of new online media units that were not wholly owned or controlled by the state and paved the way for the expansion of state-owned traditional media in the digital sphere.

Between 2008 and 2017, the Chinese Government launched multiple rounds of large-scale crackdowns targeting the unauthorised operation of video sharing sites and online audio/visual providers, the provision of pirated films, TV series and programmes (particularly those from the US, Europe, Japan and Korea) and online pornography. Many major privately-owned websites and visual service providers such as Btbbt, Yyets, BTChina, Sina Weibo, ACFUN and PhoenixNet were closed down either permanently or temporarily (SGAPPRFT, 2017; Tang, Huang and Liu, 2017). The nation-wide campaigns led to a great loss of content diversity on the Internet and significantly increased websites' need for content produced by traditional TV and film sectors. Since the clampdown, increasingly more companies in the Internet sector choose to invest in or co-produce visual content such as films, TV series and entertainment programmes with traditional TV stations and film enterprises (Zhao and Keane, 2013).

4.5.2 The Film Industry Promotion Law

On November 7th 2016, the first law of China's cultural sector – *The Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China* (hereafter the Film Production Law) – was released by the Standing Committee of the National

People's Congress (2016). The Film Production Law can be summarised as follows:

Firstly, it formally prohibits ten categories of film content ranging from content that 'violates the fundamental principles of PRC's Constitution', content that 'endangers national unity and national security', content that 'defames China's excellent traditional culture' to content that 'undermines social stability and social order'. Without providing any objective judgment criteria with regard to these abstractly defined 'forbidden zones' (e.g. the character of China's excellent traditional culture? what types of content endangers national unity and security, social stability and order), the document stipulates that every domestically-produced and imported film is required to be censored by a committee constituting no less than five specialists assigned by the Film Bureau.

Secondly, the Film Production Law lists five types of film that are to be supported by central Government: (i) films that spread China's excellent culture and promote 'socialist core values'; (ii) films that are conducive to patriotism; (iii) films that exhibit the achievements of artistic creativity and advance artistic progress; (iv) films that contribute to the development of science and education, and disseminate scientific technologies; (v) other minor types of films (which are not specified in the document) that are to be supported by national policies.

Thirdly, it amends pre-production censorship procedures. Instead of submitting script outlines to SARFT, since the coming into effect of the Law (March 1st 2017), companies only need to officially inform SAPPRFT or its provincial agencies before shooting. For films that contains sensitive content,

including 'national security, diplomatic relations, ethnic minorities, religion, and military affairs', complete scripts are still required to be submitted. The single film production permit that individuals and companies needed to apply for was also abolished, making it much easier for private capital to enter the industry.

Fourthly, it reiterates existing policies concerning the access of non-state capital in the film sector: i.e. domestic private enterprises are permitted to enter film production, distribution (not including imported films) and exhibition sectors, and foreign capital is allowed to enter theater operation, co-produce films with domestic entities and invest in state-owned production enterprises. Fifthly, it requires film producers, directors and actors to have 'professional excellence and moral integrity', observe social regulations, laws and ethics, and establish a positive social image. Sixthly, it lays out detailed punishments for practices that violate the Government's regulations in the forms of confiscation, fines and official ban.

For many producers, directors and scholars in the film sector, the Law brings 'mixed feelings' (Lai, 2017; Cheng, 2017). On one hand, it provides great convenience to the production process by virtually canceling the pre-production censorship for most films, on the other, the censorship procedure of the finished film remains unchanged and is still dependent on the subjective standards of different boards of examiners, who are, in turn, highly susceptible to the changes of social contexts, Government regulations or simply the wills of certain ruling elites.

Conclusion

The last chapter defined central Government requirements for the cultural sector in order to consolidate the CPC's legitimacy, promote the Party's

ideologies and socialist culture, maintain social and political stability. Under China's market-oriented economy and in the face of the influx of global culture, Party leaders believe that their demands could only be met by a cultural sector that is both politically compliant and economically competitive. The reform of China's cultural system has been aiming to construct a cultural market that is able to fulfill both the ideological and the economic requirements of the Party.

As has been examined, the cultural system reform in China has gone through a prolonged process of experiments, adaptations, rectification and strategic planning with the central propaganda system playing a dominant role. At the initial stage of the reform, central Government greatly decentralised its power over the television and newspaper sectors to local governments while retained the old institutional arrangements inherited from the planned economy in the film sector. Certain leeway was also given to cultural units at the local level to initiate innovative organisational and institutional changes towards profit-oriented operations. The subsequent development of the cultural sector significantly transformed the institutional arrangements of the cultural sphere and greatly enhanced the economic competitiveness of China's cultural units (particularly those in the television and film sectors).

The variegated reforms introduced from above, however, also brought chaos to the fledgling cultural market and disrupted the control of the CPC over the cultural sphere. From the late 1990s, central Government began to re-centralise its power by constructing cultural conglomerations. The nation-wide campaigns not only addressed the major problems of the previous reforms (such as market fragmentation, the lack of economic efficiency and economies of scale) but also resumed the hierarchical leadership of the

Party's propaganda system by drastically reducing cultural units below the city level and restructuring cultural groups under the Party's control.

The reforms of the cultural system between the late 1990s and 2002 gave rise to the fundamental logic of China's cultural industries that aligns political status with economic advantages. Between 2002 and 2008, central policies continued to bias towards the development of state-own cultural units.

Officially defining the entire film industry and the vast majority of mass media units as cultural industries, central Government provided substantial support in their transitions towards market oriented enterprises. The activities of domestic private companies, foreign enterprises and 'disobedient' workers in the cultural sector were stringently regulated and carefully incorporated into the official system in a way that both maintains the Party's control and benefits the economic development of China's cultural sector (particularly the further expansion of the state-owned enterprises). In recent years, the focus of China's cultural policy shifts towards the expansion of tradition cultural enterprises in the digital sphere and the elimination of the organisations and practices on the Internet that fall outside of the propaganda system. Central Government aspires to extend the dominance of state-owned and state-controlled enterprises from the traditional media to the new media and establish the fundamental logic of China's cultural sector (i.e., the alignment between political status with market dominance) in the digital space.

Has China successfully developed a powerful state-owned cultural sector?

Statistics indicate that it is indeed the case. According to the Central Cultural Leading Group for State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Office (2014: 17), by the end of 2013, state-owned enterprises constituted 91.9% in news publishing and distribution services, 74.4.% in broadcasting, television

and films services, 55.3% in art and cultural services, 53.6% in cultural and entertainment services¹⁵. Non-government-owned capital tended to converge in sectors engaging in the production of cultural equipment, with 93.4% in the production of stationary commodities, 97.9% in the production of special cultural equipment (ibid., 18). The overall performance of China's cultural industries, however, seem to have failed to meet the ruling elites' expectations. By the end of 2015, cultural industries constituted 3.97% of national GDP— a figure lower than the aim of 'national pillar industry' that accounts for at least 5% of national GDP as put forward by central Government in 2011. In spite of the stringent official limitations on introducing foreign cultural content, China's exports of cultural products are still significantly lower than its imports (the State Council, 2014). Central Government's strategies to develop globally competitive state-owned cultural enterprises have not yielded any notable results either.

According to the Top 50 Cultural Industry Players released by Ronald Berger Consultants (2012), only two Chinese companies were listed among the strongest 50 global cultural enterprises and neither of them were state-owned. The biggest problem, however, lies in the content that has been produced by China's cultural sector. After three decades of reform and years of government promotion as a 'key industrial sector', China's cultural industries seem to have failed to articulate a new 'Chinese culture' or official ideologies that can represent contemporary China, and attract domestic and international consumers (O'Connor and Xin, 2006: 279; Zhao, 2013; see also chapters Five and Six).

¹⁵ The statistics only included SOEs that were solely funded by the state and all public undertakings were excluded.

The following chapters will serve to provide an examination of the development status of China's television sector under the influence of both the general requirements of China's cultural policy (examined in Chapter Three) and the institutional arrangements of the nation's cultural system. As indicated in the last chapter, we now need to concentrate on the ability of China's cultural sector in fulfilling the 'mass line' principle. The empirical research will show that the tendency of China's cultural industries to evade and avoid the socio-economic character of culture (the 'ordinary' lives or living reality of 'the people') leads to major frustrations of the Central government's political management of cultural sectors.

Chapter Five:

The Emergence and Development of the Minsheng programme in China

5.1 The Minsheng programme as a 'wave' in China's television sector

In the post-Mao era, the politically-engineered development of China's television sector had stimulated the emergence of new formats of TV programme, marking a transformation from a media of propaganda to today's market-oriented cultural industry. Out of the large number of new genres and their formats, some stand out saliently and are referred to by scholars in this subject as 'waves' and 'revolutions' that have significantly changed China's television production. For some, there emerged three notable 'waves': (i) the audience-oriented turn of news reports and documentaries, marked by the broadcasting of *Oriental Horizon (Dongfang Shikong)* and *Focus Interview (Jiaodian Fangtan)* by CCTV; (ii) the production of Minsheng programmes by local stations pioneered by Jiangsu Provincial Television's *Zero Distance from Nanjing (Nanjing Lingjvli)*; and (iii) the 'entertainment turn' of the TV sector spearheaded by the game show *Happy Camp (Kuaile Dabenyinying)* by Hunan Satellite Television (Li, 2004: 5; Hu, Yu and Yuan, 2011: 52; Hou, 2008: 9-10).

This chapter will focus on Minsheng programmes (the following chapter concerns entertainment programmes). It is important, however, to briefly introduce *Oriental Horizon* and *Focus Interview* as well as their impacts on China's television formats. *Oriental Horizon*, which made its debut on CCTV in May 1993, was China's first national TV news magazine programme (Hong, Liu and Zhou, 2009: 42). The emergence of this landmark show was due to a

number of factors, such as the economic and political needs of CCTV to attract audiences in an increasingly commercialised media environment; the enhanced autonomy owned by programme producers as a result of media commercialisation; the exigency of the TV station to enhance credibility and professionalism); and the programme's style differed significantly from the old socialist style of media communication characterized by top-down dissemination of blatant, straightforward and repetitive propaganda (Herbert, 2001:153; Xu, 2000).

'Facing the audience sincerely' was the programme strap-line of *Oriental Horizon*, which (particularly during its early years) aimed to giving voice to the public and address public concerns from ordinary people's perspectives (Brady, 2008; Yu, 2009a: 136). Its key segment – 'Living Space' (*生活空间*), which was later renamed 'Common Story' (*百姓故事*) – produced short documentaries about ordinary people's lives (such as pedicab drivers, laid-off workers, street cleaners and retired elderly citizens). It adopted the style of *jishi zhuyi*¹⁶, which typically combines reality TV style footage, on-the-spot interviews and narrations in order to truthfully depict real lives and factual events (Berry, 2009: 47; Sun and Zhao, 2009: 103).

'Focus point' (*焦点*) was another key segment of *Oriental Horizon*, and it provided investigative reports over wrongdoings of government officials/Party carders, coverage and commentaries concerning community affairs and human interest stories (Hua, 2000). In April 1994, the producers of *Oriental Horizon* launched *Focus Interview* (*焦点访谈*). It was an investigative programme hosted by several politically courageous newspaper and magazine journalists

¹⁶ *Jishi Zhuyi* is significantly different from the format that characterize documentaries produced during Mao's era. Documentaries made at that time often adopted the style of *xianshi zhuyi* (realism), which often orchestrated 'reality' in order to serve class struggles and socialist construction.

and was largely concentrated on the exposure and criticism of local governments' wrongdoings and 'social illness'. In spite of the fact that *Focus Interview* mainly targeted at low ranking officials and low level government institutions (Yu, 2009b: 94), it provided sharp, intensive and clearly identified investigations (Li, 2002). Because of their popular focus, critical edge and their attempts to depict 'social reality' from the perspective of the masses, both *Oriental Horizon* and *Focus Interview* soon became acknowledged compelling viewing, attracting millions of viewers and huge advertising revenues (Berry, 2009: 74). The nationwide popularity of both programmes, however, did not last long. Largely because of central Government's interference, they lost much of their critical edge and since the early 2000s a high proportion of their content shifted from addressing popular concerns to promulgating the Party and the Government's 'achievements' (Hong, Liu and Zhou, 2009: 49).

The immense successes of *Oriental Horizon* and *Focus Interview* during the mid-1990s largely inspired local television stations in China to produce audience-oriented programmes that feature social issues and characterisation of ordinary citizen's livelihood. Between 1994 and 1996, there emerged a great number of TV programmes produced by provincial and city-level stations that emulated *Focus Interview*, particularly, which aimed to specialise in investigative reporting and safeguarding the interests of ordinary people against local vested-interests' abuse of power. Such aims, however, failed all too swiftly because of the 'structural limitations' local television news workers suffer in performing watchdog journalism (see Section 2, below), along with a central Government's prohibition on local stations in focusing specifically on edgy social topics (SARFT, 2002).

Minsheng television programme (or Minsheng news), which literally means

'television programme about people's lives', is a genre of television news that emerged in the early 2000s and soon became the dominant format of new-related programmes produced by local stations. There are currently over 100 Minsheng programmes broadcast by China's television stations on a daily basis, and nearly every province has at least two such programmes. To some extent, Minsheng programme could be regarded as derivative of *Oriental Horizon* with its emphases on social news, investigative reports and documentaries. Like *Oriental Horizon*, producers of Minsheng programmes also attempt to base their appeals on representing ordinary people and not Government policies, leaders' activities, exemplary Party carders and government officials which characterise 'mainstream political news'.

Three salient features of Minsheng programmes require an emphasis, as an orientation for our critical historical articulation of this evolution. Firstly, such programmes are mainly produced by territorial (i.e. non-satellite) channels of local television stations (particularly stations at provincial and city levels) – under the context of CCTV's predominance in the provision of 'national news' and the rapid development of entertainment shows produced by provincial satellite stations. It has been a 'survival strategy' taken by local non-satellite channels when they lack competitiveness in the national market (Liu, 2013: 108).

Secondly, Minsheng programmes mainly take as their subject matter local residents' daily lives (particularly city residents) and their living environments – compared with CCTV's news, the local stations have the competitive edge with their local familiarity with, and proximity to, their own regions (Hu, Wang and Zheng, 2007: 70). In addition, compared with the heavy propaganda tasks news programmes produced by CCTV have to undertake (both *Oriental Horizon* and

Focus Interview, even during the height of popularity and production in the 1990s, were required to devote a considerable proportion of airtime to the dissemination of official propaganda (Chan, 2002; Zhu, 2012: 112)), Minsheng programmes are able to focus on ordinary people to a much greater extent (particularly before the 2010s) due to their lower administrative status and their self-definition as ‘non-current-political-affair programme’ (非时事政治类节目).

A third feature of Minsheng is, that because local television stations are under the direct control of Party and Government institutions in their own regions, in contrast to central media’s news workers who have the authority to supervise local regions, Minsheng programmes’ capacity to expose or criticise the misbehaviour of political institutions and powerful businesses is highly limited. Although many local television workers aspire to practice watchdog journalistic activities (see this section, below), to avoid political risks, the primary emphasis of Minsheng programme has never been on supervising political, economic or social institutions (Wang, 2009a). Instead, its strategic focus is on representing ordinary people’s daily lives, addressing their concerns, and aiding the social management of everyday problems.

In what follows, this chapter will trace the emergence and development of Minsheng programmes in China. Because of the fact that there are over 100 such programmes that are produced by numerous local stations, this chapter does not attempt to provide a comprehensive examination of their development, but only seeks to respond to two objectives internal to this thesis; the first is to define the strategic approach to content (how Minsheng programmes aimed for truthfulness, comprehensively representing people’s everyday lives, their cultures and their living environments); and the second is to examine the evolving facilitation of central Government ideological agenda.

To undertake this to the level of veracity required, this chapter will extend the thesis methodology in three ways: it will (i) begin to draw on conducted empirical fieldwork (in-depth elite interviews with television professionals from *Zero Distance to Nanjing* (the first and arguably the most influential Minsheng programme in China) and *Jingshi Live* (Hubei provincial station's flagship news programme)); (ii) this will be supplemented by the empirical findings of existing Chinese studies concerning Minsheng programmes (produced by other television stations in order to identify the general trend of the programme's content focus on a national scale); and (iii) amplify the critical – historical narrative hitherto forged by the previous three chapters, through taking a case study approach to a TV genre within China's broad spectrum of cultural industries, and demonstrate through detailed analysis how culture and ideology merge in the contemporary political economy of culture currently used by China's central Government as a central means of political sustainability through economic development. This will then allow for a thorough critical revision of the Government concept of sustainability and the role of culture in delivering it (the central tasks of the concluding parts of the thesis).

5.2 The emergence of the Minsheng Programme

Zero Distance from Nanjing (hereafter *Zero Distance*), China's first Minsheng programme, originated from Jiangsu Provincial Television (JPT) under the institutional context of central Government's formation of new media conglomerates. Initiated in the late 1990s, the nationwide campaign aimed at enhancing Party management as well as the market competitiveness of media units, awarding a higher recognised political status to a great number of television groups at the provincial level (see Chapter Four, Section 3). Jiangsu Provincial Television (formally known as Jiangsu Radio and Television Group)

was established in 2001 based on the integration of the former Jiangsu Broadcasting Station, Jiangsu Education station with 20 other media units in Jiangsu Province. Possessing plenty of resources and being urged by central Government to assume market-oriented transition, the board of directors of the newly-formed TV conglomerate set two strategic aims for future programme reform: (i) the entertainment turn of its satellite channel; and (ii) the transformation of its news-related programmes (Zhou, 2006: 11). *Zero Distance from Nanjing* was the key product of the second reform aim.

Li Xiang, the former production manager of *Zero Distance* (from 2001 to 2009) and now the vice president of JPT's Television and Media Centre, and one of my main interviewees during the field trip, expressed that the initial idea of developing a TV programme that specifically focuses on local people's livelihoods was driven by discontent shared by television practitioners with the dominant format of news programmes in China, and was implemented under the national policy to increase the market share of provincial television stations. As he recalled,

“Our original dissatisfaction derived from the state of news... and particularly a dissatisfaction with the homogeneous and top-down mode of news communication... Television news and documentaries produced by provincial stations had been long revolving around leaders, [their] conferences and policies. Such content was necessarily aloof from people's lives and needs.. The appearance of *Oriental Horizon* was completely a sudden clap of thunder (平地一声雷). We felt if we could make a programme that attaches importance to local people's livelihoods and their interests, people would like it and want to watch it. Fortunately, our provincial leaders at that time were relatively open-minded and they urgently needed our station to achieve economic

results.” (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2016).

Li Xiang’s remarks point to a hindrance that had long curbed the economic development of provincial stations. Located at a relatively high administrative position in China’s hierarchical media structure, they are required to undertake heavy propaganda tasks. *Jiangsu News*, a typical ‘hard news’ programme broadcast by JPT, for example, normally carries at least 60% of its content concerning leaders’ activities and government policies (Gong, 2005: A2). Such kind of TV programmes that are particularly dedicated to ideological purposes are officially categorised as ‘cultural undertakings’ (see Chapter Four, Section 4), and are subsidised by governments at central and local levels. Being exempt from market competition, they find it difficult to attract audiences and advertisements.

Zero Distance, as a profit-oriented ‘non-current-political-affair programme’, on the other hand, must achieve high enough ratings to maintain its broadcast status, on the air. Like all new programmes that are broadcast by TV stations, the producers had to submit its general concept and introduction to the local SARFT for project approval, and its daily content is subject to vetting which is mainly enforced by people in authority at JPT and by the provincial propaganda department. Because of the stringent censorship system, Jing Zhigang recalled that he and his colleagues felt extremely fortunate to gain the approval of their leaders to produce a one-hour news-related programme with a different style. He believed that “the leaders at our station must have made great efforts in persuading the provincial authority” and he had an opportunity that was “hard to imagine by his peers from other stations” (quoted in Chen, 2006: 103-104). Once having the official approval, Li and other producers were entitled to make decisions concerning the design, content, programme style and they were in

charge of financial and personnel management. The great independence for programme-makers to produce and take responsibility for their own market-oriented shows was a common practice widely adopted by all TV stations in China in the late 1990s (Hong, Liu and Zhou, 2009: 44).

Despite news workers' power and independence in terms of taking charge of their programme, the production of a news-related show with social reality and people's livelihoods as its focus clearly entails 'structural limitations' for a local television station. Under the institutional arrangements of China's cultural system, all television stations are state-owned and structured under the sponsorship of Party committees or government organisations in their own regions (see Chapter Four). JPT, for example, is under the direct leadership of the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee and subject to the provincial government's censorship. Such a mechanism enables Party/Government officials to exert a tight grip on media units within their jurisdictions and central Government's constant emphasis on positive propaganda guarantees the local officials' power to eliminate media content that might damage 'social stability'. To perform their 'watchdog' roles, Chinese news agencies are known to rely on central-level overseeing (i.e., media units affiliated to central administrations can supervise local regions) or cross-regional supervision (Tong, 2011: 56). Neither of these strategies, apparently, could be applied to *Zero Distance*. However, as a programme that focuses on local people's lives, a certain extent of exposure, negative portrayal and criticism of the broad social and political environments seems to be inevitable.

Tian Li, a senior programme producer at JPT who has been working for *Zero Distance* since 2002 admits that from the first day of making the show, she and her colleagues knew that it would be extremely difficult to deeply probe many

issues that concern people's lives. As she said,

"We were certainly aware from the very beginning that the programme would have great limitations... If we always focus on in-depth investigations, we won't survive for a month. However, at the time it was really our belief that we could at least expose and criticise social problems at city and township levels. If you don't criticise at all, you can't make a programme that really speaks for ordinary people (老百姓) or reflects their real lives... Most of us were journalists. At that time, we really placed great hope on and passion in this programme..." (interview with Tian Li, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017).

Like Tian Li, nearly all the early producers of the programme believed that to make *Zero Distance* popular, it should aim at truthfully depicting people's lives and serving their interests, as a matter of strategy. According to Li Xiang, the majority of the original producers of the programme were journalists he 'poached' from Nanjing's newspapers and TV stations. They were (in his words) "brave, experienced, understand ordinary people and have critical perspectives about social issues". The major aims of his programme, he said, was to "honestly depict people's daily lives, tell their stories, provide them with information and help them to solve problems". He believed that "if we frequently avoid the roots of their concerns, people wouldn't watch us" (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2016). However, Li Xiang and his colleagues were also clearly aware of the political environment and chose to progress cautiously. As he said,

"...it was impossible to be too critical from the very start. My hope was that if we could gradually make this programme more influential and more profitable we could gradually push the boundaries (逐步推进)... There would be one day

when leaders from the province would recognise that [there is] a programme that not only has high-ratings, and a large social influence but also closes the distance between the government and the people” (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017).

To fulfil the strategic aims of portraying ordinary people’s lives and giving voice to popular concern, *Zero Distance* was designed as a TV magazine with a focus on news and documentaries. The programme was scheduled to be one hour long and was comprised of four segments. The first segment, ‘Social News’ (社会新闻) provided short news reports concerning events that had taken place. It was followed by intensive reports and/or documentaries under the title ‘Exclusive Coverage’ (独家报道). The lengths of the first two segments would depend on daily content, but the second segment would normally be around ten minutes longer than the first one. The third segment was ‘Meng Fei Talk Newspapers’ (孟非读报), the duration of which was around seven minutes and was a talk show featuring the anchor’s (孟非) comments on recent news reported by local or national newspapers. At the end of the programme, a controversial social issue was raised, and viewers were invited to voice their opinions through telephone calls, text messages, letters and emails. Audiences were also invited to contact the programme for difficulties they encounter in everyday lives. People’s opinions and requests were then used as topics and material for future programmes. Apart from the third segment (which sometimes made comments on national and international news), nearly all the content of *Zero Distance* focused on events in and the people of Nanjing. Table 1 illustrates the arrangement and general content of the programme on 1st February 2002.

Table 1. The programme arrangement and headlines of *Zero Distance* (1st February 2002)

Segment	Headline	Length
Social News	Two car accidents in Yu Huaxi Road Multiple vehicle collisions in Zhong Nanshan Road An 'outsider' (Waidiren) committed suicide on the street Residents receive strange packages Remarkable person: consumed only peanuts and water for 17 years	16 minutes
Exclusive Coverage	Is this year's rice safe to eat? A story of Lao Zhang and his 'children' Migrant workers: the backbone of Nanjing	30 minutes
<i>Meng Fei Talk Newspapers</i>	Why has the public transportation reform lost its public trust? Traditional 'virtuous wives' are losing their attractiveness	8 minutes
Social issue	Do Nanjing people discriminate against 'outsiders'? Are 'virtuous wives' losing their attractiveness?	2 minutes

Source: programme list provided by producers of *Zero Distance* on 20th June 2016 (see Appendix 4 for a scan of the original file).

According to Li Xiang, the 'content value' for *Zero Distance* is typically

measured based on six criteria: proximity to ordinary people (贴近性), representation of local residents (代表性), conflict (冲突性), timeliness (及时性), significance (重大性) and entertainment (趣味性). He believes that what distinguishes *Zero Distance* from other current political affairs programme is its emphasis on its closeness to ordinary people and the attractiveness of its content. Proximity, representation and entertainment, therefore, were regarded as important strategic focuses of his programme. As news workers, however, he and his colleagues tended to select subjects and events with significance and conflicts in a timely manner, and it was believed that such focus would give the programme certain depth and make its development more sustainable. *Zero Distance* was thus mainly divided into two components. The first S (Social News) featured short reports that were entertaining or sensational, which particularly included natural disasters, accidents, criminal cases and funny stories of all sorts. The other focus of the programme was segment two, which frequently took up half of the total airing time and was aimed at providing truthful depictions and in-depth investigations concerning local lives and people's living environments (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017).

After its debut on 1st January 2002, *Zero Distance* soon became one of the most widely watched and commercially profitable local TV programmes. Within a week it entered AC Nielson's top ratings ranking in Nanjing city. In the 28th week since the first broadcast, it became a top 5 rating programme. Six weeks later, it was the most watched show in Nanjing, with an average rating of 8.3% (Wang, 2008b: 745). In the following three years, it maintained its position as one of the most popular programmes in Nanjing with ratings way higher than CCTV's flagship news programme *News Broadcast (Xinwen Lianbo)* (Chen, 2005: 105). In 2002, *Zero Distance*'s commercial revenue (which primarily came from sales of naming rights and advertising time slots) amounted to RMB 50 million yuan;

more than twice the income of JPT's whole City Channel in 2001 (before the show went on air). In 2004 and 2005 it became one of the most profitable TV programmes nationally, with an annual income of over 100 million yuan (Wang, 2008b: 755). In 2003, the programme received the annual award for 'public interest' from China's leading political magazine *Nanfengchuang* (*South Review*), which highly acclaimed it as a 'revolutionary programme' that has 'connected public opinions to government's wills and empowered ordinary people with the rights to participate in public decision making... it is a programme that truly belongs to citizens, rather than to certain leaders or businessmen who want to achieve political or commercial interests' (South Review, 2003: 38).

It is hard to say if *Zero Distance* really deserved such a compliment because even during its early years, it was heavily constricted and swayed by both the government and the market in its attempts to serve 'public interests' (See Section 3, below). However, during the first two years from when *Zero Distance* went on the air, it indeed produced several works that aimed to truthfully depict local people's lives and connect their livelihoods to the broader social and political environments that people's lives are embedded in. During the fieldwork, *The Old South City (Laochengnan)*, for example, was repeatedly mentioned by the programme producers as one of their most 'satisfied' works. This one-hour documentary was broadcast in April 2003 during two consecutive days and depicts ordinary people's living status in the laochengnan era – the old city centre where the history and traditional way of life of Nanjing were well preserved. Focusing on a barber, a restaurant owner and a street performer, the documentary highlighted the simple joys and frustrations of ordinary lives, and residents' common dependence on and attachment to their friends, neighbourhoods and the city. Several real estate companies' plans to demolish

the old city was another major topic as this was a common concern raised by local residents when they were interviewed.

Throughout the documentary (especially the second part), people repetitively voiced their opinions (mostly worries) about the impact such projects would bring onto local culture and way of life, and sought help in front of the camera, in the hope that the plan would not be implemented. Since the broadcast of the documentary, the programme received tens of thousands of emails, texts and phone calls from local residents. Many were deeply touched by it and requested *Zero Distance* to produce more works like it. Viewers also requested *Zero Distance* to produce follow-up investigations concerning the government's urban renewal plan and in particular why such a demolition project could be passed when residents widely opposed it. The investigation was never carried out as it was thwarted by local officials. The producers, however, were able to raise the issue in the last segment (social issue) and received public opinions. "It is works like *Laochengnan*", a producer said, "that really attract an audience and build our reputation" (interview with a vice producer-in-chief, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017).

With the almost instant popularity of *Zero Distance*, the concept of the Minsheng programme (or Minsheng news) became a widely focused on 'new phenomenon' in China's television landscape. In his 2003 interview with professor Li Xing from Nanjing Normal University, the head of JPT's City Channel Jing Zhigang declared that the Minsheng programme, which originated from *Zero Distance*, became a new mode of news-related television shows in China. He summarised the major features of this emerging format. First, it focused on ordinary people and created a participatory local culture which was motivated by people voicing their opinions, needs and aspirations. This was

reflected in *Zero Distance*'s constant popular focus and the fact that it frequently invited local residents (through interviews and feedback) to comment on events, lifestyles and public concerns. Second, it helped local people to "solve difficulties and ameliorate anxieties" (排忧解难) (Li and Jing, 2004: 47) by reporting on their everyday difficulties and aiming to solve such problems. Third, it told ordinary people's stories, reflected their joy, suffering and wishes. Jing Zhigang believed that such kinds of stories help to create a common culture in Nanjing that enhances residents' solidarity and social responsibility (Li and Jing, 2004).

5.3 The rise of the Minsheng programme as a national TV format

What really made the Minsheng programme a 'revolution' in China's television sector was the fast mushrooming of numerous clones of *Zero Distance* on a national scale. The institutional arrangement of China's cultural system, the content requirement of central Government and the nascent nature of China's TV sector as a commercialised industry combined contributed to the rapid spread of the new television format.

First, apart from the satellite channels owned by provincial stations (most provinces only have one such channel), all local stations in China are required to operate regionally, and their signals can only be received by TV sets within their own territorial boundaries (or in some cases also in neighbouring regions). The lack of market competitiveness of local broadcasters outside their own regions determines that they are unable to compete with CCTV or provincial satellite channels nationally (Liu, 2013: 108). Targeting local audiences, therefore, is widely regarded by local stations as the most suitable strategy (Lathan, 2007: 55). Second, in order to protect the domestic media industry,

central Government requires all programmes being broadcast during the 'golden hours' (18:30-22:00) to be Chinese-originated and imported programmes must not exceed 25% of total programming every day (SARFT, 1995). This mandatory stipulation further enhances local stations' needs for formats that are regionally focused, commercially viable, and can be self-produced. Third, largely because of the stringent ideological control and economic uncertainty of China's TV sector, local producers have a strong tendency to imitate each other's innovations in order to reduce political and commercial risks (Keane, 2015). The lack of copyright protection in China's cultural sector (particularly in the early 2000s) further enhanced the desirability of cloning already successful programme modes (Keane, 2014: 81). As stated by Wang and Lv (2009: 73), 'since *Zero Distance*, Minsheng news has become the synonym of television news innovation. Minsheng news has also become one of the main weapons used by TV stations in seizing the local market'.

Between 2001 and 2004, over one hundred Minsheng programmes emerged across China (Wang, 2006a:7). By the end of 2005, nearly all provinces had at least two news-related programmes that concentrated on local people's livelihoods (see table 2 for some of the most well-known programmes) (Hou, 2008). Although Minsheng programmes produced by local stations varied in their emphasis (e.g., one might focus more on news reports or documentaries), they often consisted of three main components which originated from *Zero Distance*: the coverage of and comments on local issues and events (including investigative reports), documentaries of local people's lives, and the provision of information and assistance to local residents in solving their everyday problems (Hu, Yu and Yuan, 2006: 17-21; Ma and Li, 2011: 259). In addition, in their research of the content produced by over thirty Minsheng programmes produced by ten provincial stations, Hu, Yu and Yuan (2011) found that they

frequently invite ordinary residents to voice their opinions through interviews, emails and phone calls. Some also enlist a great number of ‘amateur journalists’ from local areas in order to supplement programme content. Professor Li Xing referred to the widespread production of Minsheng programmes as the ‘third revolution of Chinese television’. He believed that it marked the transformation of the focus of the TV sector from political elites to ordinary citizens, from a pedagogic approach to a civic approach and from an instrument of propaganda to ‘what television should be like’ (Li, 2004: 7).

Table 2. Minsheng programmes broadcast by local stations (selected)

Programme name	TV station	Focused region	Time on the air	First broadcast
<i>News Front Line (Xinwen Diyixian)</i>	Anhui Provincial TV	Anhui Province	18:00-19:00 (in 2005)	Dec. 2004
<i>Jingshi Live (Jingshi Zhibo)</i>	Hubei Provincial TV	Mainly Wuhan city	18:00-19:25 (2005)	Nov. 2004
<i>Urban Report (Dushi Baodao)</i>	Henan Provincial TV	Mainly Zhengzhou city	19:30-20:10 (2006)	Nov. 2003
<i>New North (Xin Beifang)</i>	Liaoning Provincial TV	Liaoning province	17:55-19:30 (2005)	Oct, 2001
<i>Minsheng Focus (Minsheng guanzhu)</i>	ShiJiazhuang City TV	Mainly Shijiazhuang city	18:00-19:00 (2006)	Nov. 2004
<i>1818 News Watch (1818 Xinwen Yan)</i>	Zhejiang Provincial TV	Zhejiang province	18:18-19:30 (2005)	Jan. 2004

<i>Minsheng Direct Train (Minsheng Zhitongche)</i>	Shandong Provincial TV	Shandong province	17:55-19:10 (2005)	Oct. 2004
<i>Focus Today (Jinri Guanzhu)</i>	Guangdong Provincial TV	The Pearl River Delta region	21:00-22:00 (2018)	Jan. 2005

Note: Programme information is adapted from (Hu, Yu and Yuan, 2011: 123-158) and Hou (2010: 227-245), with the exception of the last one, which is taken from the website <http://www.tvmao.com/tvcolumn/b1FYLQ==/playingtime>. All programmes are broadcast on a daily basis.

Li Xing's complimentary view was shared by many Chinese scholars and media practitioners in the early/mid-2000s. Journalist Zhao Enchao from the *Southern Weekly* (南方周末), for example, argued that the rise of the Minsheng programme might denote the emergence of 'civic journalism' in China. Focusing on *1860 News Eyes* (a Minsheng programme in Jiangsu), he found that it tended to report on public issues (such as the electoral procedures of local government's development commissions and the legal volume of livestock permitted on public streets) from ordinary people's perspectives and invited them to voice their opinions on such issues. He believed that such a programme could enhance citizens' participation in political and social activities (Zhang, 2004).

Nanjing University professor Pan Zhichang highly acclaimed Minsheng Programmes' agendas, stating they reflect and promote 'ordinary people's values, attitudes, worldviews and emotions' (Pan, 2004: B1). Based on the examination of two documents produced by Zhejiang's Minsheng programmes concerning the local residents' lives in the Yangtze River delta region and

particularly how their lives were disrupted by the deforestation projects conducted by local factories, he believed that such documentaries not only predicted the 'harmonious co-existence of local people' but also 'touch on deep social problems such as the lack of effective laws in protecting local residents in environmental disputes' (ibid., B2).

The Minsheng programme, however, also drew criticism from academia, particularly due to the fact that many local stations filled their programmes with individual events that were violent, sensational, sexual and trivial while avoiding dealing with broader social and political problems. Because of the sheer quantity of such programmes that have emerged since 2001, it is nearly impossible to investigate how many of them prioritised public interests in their everyday operations or just wanted to make quick commercial profits in a politically safe manner.

Research carried out by various scholars, however, has suggested that most took the second path. Cheng and Chen, argued that Minsheng programmes had a strong tendency to focus on sensational events such as murders, suicides and car accidents. They studied Chengdu city's several news broadcasts over one week and found that much of their daily content was about natural and man-made disasters, neighbourhood conflicts, traffic accidents and criminal cases. Such incidents often filled these programmes without in-depth explanations or investigations. They believed that such content did not represent the diversified cultures of local lives, was unlikely to probe deeply into the roots of these negative events and tended to create a one-sided violent image of the society (Cheng and Chen, 2004: 30-31). In their content analysis of 'Minsheng stories' and 'help programmes' produced by three television stations in Henan province over a week period, Xu, Liu and Wang (2005: A3)

found that these programmes provided a ‘very narrowed depiction of people’s lives’ and had ‘probably very limited ability to influence local policies’. They found that documentaries produced by Minsheng programmes tended to create melodramatic effects by repetitively focusing on family-based conflicts such as extramarital affairs while staying away from social conflicts that might involve the exposure of government wrongdoings.

The ‘assistance’ provided by the programmes to local residents was also prone to focus on relatively ‘trivial’ issues such as problems with electricity/water supplies and complaints concerning the provision of services within people’s residential xiaoqu (community). In his long-term study of six Minsheng programmes produced by JPT and the Nanjing Television Station from 2002 to 2004, Chen (2004) found that these programmes were filled with sensational and violent incidents such as car accidents, fire disasters and neighbourhood disputes. He believed that, in spite of the popularity of the emerging television format, the programmes had a strong tendency to focus on trivial and individual incidents while avoiding the investigation of the broad institutional environments or the socioeconomic causes of human suffering.

For Producers of *Zero Distance*, government’s institutional control over the media sector and the programme’s profit-making imperative are the two primary reasons why *Zero Distance* had to opt for trivial and sensational content and to approach ordinary people’s livelihoods in a relatively ‘narrowed’ manner. First, in their everyday operations, the biggest obstacle that producers face is the daily internal censorship carried out by the television station and the constant pressure from the local government when the programme information is deemed as ‘detrimental to social stability’. During the first two years of *Zero Distance* being on the air, it upheld the principle of producing at least two

documentaries or investigative reports every week that not only portrayed local lives but also projected people's livelihoods as something deeply connected to the broad socioeconomic changes of Nanjing city. However, such content is most likely to offend officials and other vested interests that are connected to local governments. With the almost 'overnight' popularity of *Zero Distance*, the ability of the programme to serve the public interest was severely debilitated. As a producer recalled,

"We became very influential and many people were watching us. Our leaders began to watch us too. It came to the point when almost every time we produced a work with depth (有深度的作品), we offended people with power and influence. They could make direct contact with the provincial government. People from the province then demanded [our] station to adhere to positive propaganda. There are that many institutions with authorities and connections, which one is not more powerful than you? As *Zero Distance from Nanjing* became more and more well-known, the censorship just became more and more unbearable. Many programmes were shot (枪毙) before broadcast...We often thought 'why waste time making these things?' (interview with a senior producer, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2016).

Second, as a profit-oriented 'cultural product', the survival of a Minsheng programme is dependent on its market share as reflected in the ratings. JPT's board of directors, for example, require all 'non-current-political-affair' programmes to obtain a minimum rating of 1.8% to remain safely on the air. Producers' personal income and bonuses are also closely connected to the economic performance of their own works. As one journalist said,

"Our station has an internally-controlled performance assessment system

and rating is the most important indicator of performance. Each year we have to reach a target rating which has a floating range but is mainly based on our rating the year before. We have extra bonuses if we exceed the target and you are fined if you do not reach it... Another major income is advertisements. Each period we set a fixed advertising price for customers, which is negotiable individually but still largely based on our previous ratings..”(interview with a journalist, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2016).

In order to quickly attract audiences, Minsheng programmes often favour news content that is (in Li Xiang’s words) “sensational, peculiar, sexual and violent” (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017). In addition, because of the widespread cloning of the same television format, the competition for news resources became fierce among local television stations. In Jiangsu Province, for example, six similar programmes had been produced by provincial and city level stations by the end of 2004, whose regional focuses overlapped with each other. In order to attract audiences, apart from various commercial promotions that were frequently carried out ¹⁷, nearly all programmes employed a large number of amateur correspondents from local residents. The huge influx of news clues and self-made videos and the inability of amateur journalists to undertake in-depth investigations often led to the over-dependence of a programme on ‘short reports’ (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017).

The constant compromises that TV workers must make when dealing with the tensions and dissonance among political requirements, commercial viability

¹⁷ In order to attract attention, from 2003 to 2006, nearly all Minsheng programmes in Jiangsu lunched various types of commercial activities (such as giving away celebrity concerts tickets, offering free tours to overseas regions, exhibiting films in local communities, hiring helicopters or airships to promote programme banners, etc.). News workers often had to spend a large amount of time and efforts in designing and carrying out such ‘extra activities’, rather than being able to fully devote to the production of news and documentaries.

and professional ideals are not a unique problem for *Zero Distance*. Li Yang and Yuan Yihong, two senior programme producers from the Chongqing Broadcasting Group, for example, argued that the core market competitive edge of a Minsheng programme depends on its focus on ordinary people and its ability to tell their stories and solve their problems from the perspective of the masses. They believe that ‘if we let elites and leaders become the protagonists of the news, the ordinary people will abandon the news’ (Li and Yuan, 2006: 54). However, under the institutional environment of China's media system, local news workers find the honest depiction of local residents’ social lives and the safeguarding of people's interests to be risky as they entail the media’s supervision of local governments and powerful social institutions.

In my interviews with the producers of *Jingshi Live* – Hubei Provincial station’s flagship Minsheng programme – their preferences for truthful and ‘in-depth’ reports/documentaries as well as the difficulties in producing such content were also clearly expressed. Li Na, a senior *Jingshi Live* programme maker gave me an example of why it is hard for her and her colleagues to truthfully depict local residents’ lives and why government’s control is driving her programme towards entertainment in order to survive in the market place.

“We once tried to make a documentary about water access problems in Jiangxia. Our original intention was to call upon people in Wuhan to save water. It was a good thing... Suddenly, the residents we interviewed told us that the reason why they did not have clean water was because their drinking water was heavily polluted by local factories. Do we report about things like that? Even if we do, is the investigation over? Don’t we need to find out why they were able to discharge waste water into the Yanzi River? What government departments were involved? Who was responsible? Those

questions are also what the audiences want to know... But if we investigate, we are highly likely to upset the leaders. So, we later reported the problem to the station and they told us not to carry on... It is just really hard to tell people's stories without revealing the negative aspects of society... Unless, of course, you only focus on the meaningless and funny things..." (interview with Li Na, Hubei Provincial Television, 2016).

In one year of working at Hubei TV Station, I engaged in sustained interactions with China's 'media people' during the fieldwork, gaining the distinct sense that many journalists at provincial television stations display 'three traits' that are perceptively summarised by Yu Haiqing. First, they aspire to be 'populist intellectuals' who protect people's interests and enlighten the masses. Second, they are Party members and Government employees who serve their patrons in return for sponsorship. For some intellectuals in China, to 'serve the authority' means to offer limited criticism and suggestions so the establishment can be improved. Third, they are 'commercial brokers' who have to satisfy the audiences and attract advertisers (Yu, 2009: 132-134). The production of Minsheng programmes, especially producers' attempts to truthfully reflect people's lives, investigate their living environments and make comments on issues of public concern, in this sense, is a strategy applied by cultural workers to fulfil the three roles concurrently. To say this, of course, is not to assert that all producers of Minsheng programmes (or the vast majority of them) in China consider 'serving the people' as an important moral or professional code. An interview conducted by Hassid (2015: 25), for example, suggests that many Chinese news workers are just 'muddling along without putting much thought into their work one way or another'. No matter what aims a Minsheng programme tended to prioritise, by the mid-2000s, central Government's overwhelming emphasis on positive propaganda, the severe structural

limitations on local television stations in providing critical content, and intense market competition combined were pushing such programmes towards trivial topics, narrowed themes and infotainment so they could survive both politically and economically.

5.4 The almost entire ‘entertainment turn’ of the Minsheng programme

The year 2004 saw the intensification of media censorship and central Government’s determination to reduce ‘negative information’ in the construction of a ‘harmonious society’. In late 2004, SARFT launched a series of campaigns aimed at ‘cleaning up the screen’ and demanded all television stations to eradicate ‘unhealthy’ information (People.cn, 2004). A particular focus of these campaigns was on reducing crimes, violence and the exposure of corruption in television programmes because such content was deemed by central leaders as portraying a chaotic society, hurting the image of the Party and giving rise to social instability (Bai, 2014: 99-100). Although the campaigns were not targeting Minsheng programmes specifically, they had huge repercussions on local news programmes’ ability to report on ‘social darkness’. As a direct response to the central policy, nearly all provincial governments tightened the control of negative content in local news. The Jiang Su Provincial Party Committee, for example, demanded the proportion of ‘negative content’ in Minsheng programmes to be lower than 20% (Tang, 2014: 108). The ‘upper limit’ of negative reports stipulated by Leaders in Hubei Province was 15% (Hubei Broadcasting Station, 2014: 11).

As discussed above, even before the national campaigns, producers of Minsheng programmes were already suffering from severe limitations when they tried to depict local lives and people’s living environments in a truthful and

in-depth manner. The tightening of media control by both central and local governments undoubtedly drove them further away from such agendas and ambitions. According to Zhang Jianggeng, a producer of *Zero Distance*, the head of JPT promised provincial leaders that ‘under no circumstances should we make mistakes in guiding public opinions, even if it means sacrificing the ratings’ (cited in Shan and Zhu, 2008: 25). In Li Xiang’s eyes, the 2004 campaigns and the limitations set by leaders “basically shattered our dreams in making a meaningful Minsheng programme... Our earlier aims to push the political boundaries were clearly impossible” (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017). His disappointment was shared by a former producer of Hubei TV’s *Jingshi Live*. According to him, during the national campaigns, he and his colleagues were frequently required by provincial leaders to “adhere to positive propaganda” and “to protect Hubei’s image” especially because central leaders had started to monitor the non-satellite channels of provincial stations (before 2004, central Government’s news monitoring groups usually only inspected satellite channels) (interview with a senior programme producer, Hubei Provincial Television, 2016).

The next section will focus on the three most notable content strategies taken by *Zero Distance* between 2004 and 2010 when the programme shifted towards the provision of entertaining information in order to meet the governments’ ideological requirements and survive in the marketplace. These strategies are summarized by the author based on interviews conducted with television practitioners.

5.4.1 The ‘entertaining’ of *Zero Distance*

In late 2004, an internal meeting was held among producers of *Zero Distance* which resolved a shift in the programme’s main focus from portraying local

people honestly to providing fresh and attractive information in order to enhance advertising revenues in the increasingly competitive 'Minsheng market'. To meet the provincial government's 'quota' concerning negative content, the conference decided to significantly reduce the proportion of its coverage of violent incidents such as murder and suicide, and to scale down its reports concerning political and social issues. This strategic shift denoted the transition of the programme's primary goal from serving public interest towards serving the Government and the market. Quite a number of producers left after the meeting because of their dissatisfaction with the 'entertainment turn'. But the vacant positions were soon taken by newly hired university graduates (many without fixed-term contracts) (interview with a senior news editor, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2016).

Scholars from various nations and regions, in their studies of modern commercial television, have observed the tendency of news-related content to transform from 'hard news' towards light-hearted forms of news, documentaries and commentaries in order to interest audiences and attract commercial revenues (e.g., Harrington, 2008; Piontek, 2011; Bignell, 2014). The typical 'content strategy' when media units conflate news with entertainment, with a focus on the strange, the sexual, the private, the scandalous, the sensational, etc., has been widely recorded by research conducted around the world (e.g., Goad, 1994: 15-16; Franklin, 1997: 4; Croteau and Hoynes, 2006: 168; Kramer, 2013).

For *Zero Distance*, such strategies have also become the main focus in maintaining commercial success, and this is particularly the case when truthful depiction and intensive investigation of issues concerning people's social lives was rendered extremely difficult by governments' policies and censorship.

There are, however, official limitations concerning how 'entertaining' and 'sensational' a programme can get. Focusing on the criticism, exposure and discussion of local issues that involve local officials, government institutions, or power companies in an entertaining and satiric manner (a strategy used by some Western TV shows to attract audiences who have lost faith or interest in traditional current affairs programmes (Jones, 2005; Turner, 2010: 89)) is certainly highly risky. Reports concerning 'sensational events' such as car accidents, fire disasters and suicides have been strictly limited due to their 'negative nature'. The often 'powerless' producers, therefore, naturally turn towards the even less powerful ordinary residents for entertaining stories that are commercially viable.

Immediately after the aforementioned internal meeting, the programme significantly changed its content arrangements. The most noticeable change was that the air time of its first segment (social news) was largely extended to around 30 minutes in order to cover more short reports, and the length of the second segment (intensive reports and documentaries) was significantly shortened accordingly. In addition, the last segment of the programme (Social Issue) was replaced by a 'prize-giving quiz', which offers prizes such as televisions and air-conditioners to 'lucky viewers'.

When asked, the producers identified the major differences concerning before and after the change as reflected in the content. Li Xiang (who left *Zero Distance* in 2009 and spoke more frankly) stated that it was the transition from significant issues to trivial issues, from typical people to unusual people, and from social problems to family problems (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017). Another producer who has been working for the programme for over a decade offered a more 'official answer' and suggested

that it was a transition of focus from reflecting people's lives as social beings to telling their stories within their families and communities (interview with a senior news editor, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2016).

From late 2004, 'lieqi news' (literally translated as news that hunts for the novel and the strange) became a salient content focus of Minsheng programmes in general and of *Zero Distance* in particular (Chen, 2017b; Wu, 2012b; Zhang, 2008: 24). There are at least three major reasons why news workers tended to focus on such types of news content. First, as Wang's (2010d) large-scale empirical research participated in by 13 news agencies reveals, because of the stringent control that is constantly enforced by central and local governments. China's news workers in general have a strong tendency to focus on content that is 'politically safe' and economically profitable. Individual events and people that are unusual, entertaining and even adventurous were therefore chosen as material to meet audiences' desire for curiosity, pleasure and relaxation. Second, as explained by a news editor from *Zero Distance*, because of the unusual, strange and 'isolated' attributes of such people and events, lie qi news are not considered as 'negative content' and do not involve broader social issues. A Minsheng programme, therefore, can use 'lieqi news' to dilute the proportion of accidents and disasters without reducing the latter's actual quantity (interview with a senior news editor, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2016). Third, as pointed out by Pan (2010), a Chinese scholar who frequently participates in the design and production of Minsheng programmes, lieqi news fulfils 'Chinese people's natural desire for curious things that happen around them' (para 21). It also encourages attention on a programme since the creation of such kinds of news is largely based upon ordinary people's participation (especially their provision of news clues and self-made videos). Local people usually want to participate because of their desire to be on the television.

In *Zero Distance*, lieqi news most frequently appears as short reports in the first segment. Because of the extension of the air time of the first segment, a largely quantity of such news was needed on a daily basis. Since late 2004, the programme strongly encouraged its amateur correspondents to actively seek news sources or conduct follow-up interviews based on local residents' news clues and filled the entire segment with videos largely produced by non-professional journalists. Because of the unusual nature of lieqi news, it is difficult to put them into categories. The headlines of some of *Zero Distance*'s short reports broadcast on 27th July 2007 (see table 3), however, suggest how peculiar and trivial such 'social news' can be.

Table 3. 'Lieqi news' broadcast by *Zero Distance* (27th July 2007)

Segment	Headline
Social News	<p>A parrot fish grows Chinese characters, residents shoot video out of curiosity</p> <p>Swallowed dentures by accident, old man's life in danger</p> <p>Giant worm grows out of tree, residents are amazed</p> <p>Pregnant wife left home after a fight with husband</p> <p>Strange telephone expenses</p> <p>How strange! A youngster uses hoes in fishing</p> <p>Strange bird with beautiful voice found by tourist</p> <p>Unbearable weather! Journalist tries egg-cooking on Nanjing Yangzi River Bridge.</p>
Exclusive Report	<p>Uniform photos of post-90s generation girl went viral online</p> <p>Drunken man runs wild in Chengxian Street</p>

Source: reproduced from Chen (2010a: 43-44).

Zero Distance frequently combines ‘lie qi’ elements with sexual, gossip-generating and scandalous events that have taken place within local people’s households or communities. Chen’s (2010a) examination of the 11 documentaries broadcast by the programme from 1st July to 17th July 2008, for example, found that eight concerned love/marriage-related affairs or conflicts with neighbours (p.22). According to Li Xiang, since late 2004, *Zero Distance* has significantly elevated the proportion of sexual affairs and family scandals to “probably over 50%” as a replacement for documentaries that depict local residents’ social and political lives. “You may not believe”, he said, “most of our journalists waited outside hospitals” delivery rooms, the civil affairs bureau, Falangs¹⁸, train stations and Nanjing’s most populated streets looking for such stories” (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017). The most frequent topics of such documentaries, according to him, concern extramarital affairs, fighting over family property, and community drama (such as disputes among neighbours).

Li Xiang also briefly introduced the general steps for making such a documentary. First, a journalist will approach one party (usually the disadvantaged side) for shooting permission and a general story. Second, if the story is ‘attractive’ enough, the journalist (along with the camera crew) will follow the ‘victim’ to the other main ‘characters’ involved in order to film their regular dramatic ‘encounters’. The journalist will play the role of inter-mediator and attempt to solve conflicts after the sensational footage has been collected. Finally, if the conflicts remain unsolved, a ‘relationship/marriage expert’ or a

¹⁸ A civil affair bureau is where Chinese people get their marriage or divorce certificates. Falang, literally translated as ‘hair saloon’, is the site where sex workers provide services.

lawyer will be invited to continue with the 'peace making work'. For such stories, Li Xiang said, "whether they are dramatic (紧张刺激) and gimmicky (有噱头) is the key. If they are not dramatic enough, we won't report on them in the first place". When I asked if all the characters and events are real rather than being actors and scripted stories, Li Xiang insisted that all documentaries made by *Zero Distance* are real, although they are normally heavily edited in order to highlight the 'sensational moments' (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017).

Apart from focusing on local people's family scandals and community conflicts, another common strategy of *Zero Distance* was the investigation and exposure of the sex industry. As Chen (2010a: 24) found in his analysis of content produced by Nanjing's five Minsheng programmes (including *Zero Distance*) in June 2008, "these programmes seem to be obsessed with topics like 'a secret investigation of strippers', 'investigation of PR men', and 'the secrets of paid escorts". According to Li Xiang, between 2005 and 2009, the coverage of illegal sexual activities in karaoke bars and falangs (hair saloons) was a 'main topic' (主题) of *Zero Distance*'s investigative reports. He provided me with two major reasons for such a focus. First, the exposure of sexual activities provides the key components of an 'entertainment show' such as lieqi (as sexual workers are the group of people most ordinary local residents rarely engage with), and privacy, sex, scandals, etc. attract audiences (particularly male audiences). Second, the nationwide anti-prostitution campaign is something both central and local governments have been consistently carrying out. Prostitutes (especially those working in 'hair saloons') and their customers are among the most vulnerable and powerless groups of people in China who are unlikely to have connections to high-level government officials.

The journalists' exposure of such 'illegal activities', therefore, is normally not considered by local government leaders as a provision of negative content. An important principle a reporter needs to bear in mind when illegal sexual activities are investigated, according to Li Xiang, is to "contact the local police after the investigation" and "report on the police's anti-vice operation", as such a strategy helps to portray the reporter as someone who contributes to the eradication of "unhealthy social phenomenon" (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017).

In interviews with Li Xiang, he repeatedly emphasised that the overwhelming focus of *Zero Distance* on the provision of (in his words) "shallow, boring and trivial things" (肤浅无聊琐碎的东西) was something his professional principles and moral codes as a news worker were against. A strong dissatisfaction with the state of Minsheng programmes was the main reason why he and many other producers eventually chose to leave. As he recalled,

"Our aims were always simple. First, we hoped we could achieve ratings that were good enough. Second, as news workers we wanted to do something meaningful. Those were our thoughts and it was very important that we could keep our passion and ideals. From 2004, most Minsheng programmes became extremely vulgar. They were just very disgusting to me. Do we need university graduates to do such kinds of news? Having some middle school students should be enough" (interview with Li Xiang, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017).

Not all employees of the programme, however, share similar views with Li Xiang. A young reporter who joined *Zero Distance* in 2012, for example, perceives economic benefit as his priority and perhaps the only concern. As he said,

“From my perspective, making a television programme is not different from making a film. Some people say that a film not only has to achieve box-office revenues not also needs to display certain in-depth thoughts. I think that’s crap. There isn’t one director who does not want their films to have large sales. And there isn’t one television worker who does not want their programme to have great ratings... I don’t worry about whether my works are trivial or vulgar. I have to make a living and my income is directly linked up with ratings... The most important thing is people watch what I make.” (interview with a journalist, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2016).

5.4.2 Minsheng programmes in decline

The transformation of *Zero Distance* from a programme that aspired to depict ordinary people’s lives, problems, opinions and wishes to one that focussed on the entertaining, the unusual, the trivial and the sexual to a large extent reflects the entire landscape of Minsheng programmes in China because similar censorship standards, institutional limitations and commercial pressure are commonly shared by local stations. Since 2005, there has been a lot of research conducted by Chinese scholars that has identified such programmes’ excessive entertainment, leiqi and ‘vulgar’ focuses. Li’s (2011: A4) observation on three Minsheng programmes produced by Sichuan Provincial TV and Chongqing TV in 2010 from June 7th to June 27th, for example, suggested that 65% of social news and around 67% of ‘residents’ stories’ focused on ‘neighbourhood disputes, street fights, family conflicts and the exposure of sex workers’. In their three years’ research of over thirty Minsheng programmes produced by ten provincial stations, Hu, Yu and Yuan (2011: 46-48) found that such programmes in general display a strong tendency towards the trivial, the ‘vulgar’ and the bizarre.

By the early 2010, Minsheng programmes – the once highly acclaimed concept – had almost become synonymous with trivial news and ‘vulgar’ stories (Chen, 2017b: 55). As *Broadcasting Realm* (视听界), a national key academic journal which published a great number of works in the early/mid-2000s in support of this emerging television format, commented in 2008, ‘...after its initial shine, the Minsheng news programme has become increasingly more marginalised, non-mainstream and negative. Its content is shallow and trivial... Some even blindly seek lieqi content and to maximise audiences’ desire for peeping into privacy’ (Shan and Zhu, 2008: 24). Minsheng news programmes are widely criticised by scholars for focusing on trivial issues without news values, depicting lives in an extremely impartial and superficial way as if local residents are detached from their broader socioeconomic environments, and avoiding more pressing social and political issues such as unemployment, the lack of social welfare and environmental degradation (Du, 2011: 57; Yan, 2014: 75).

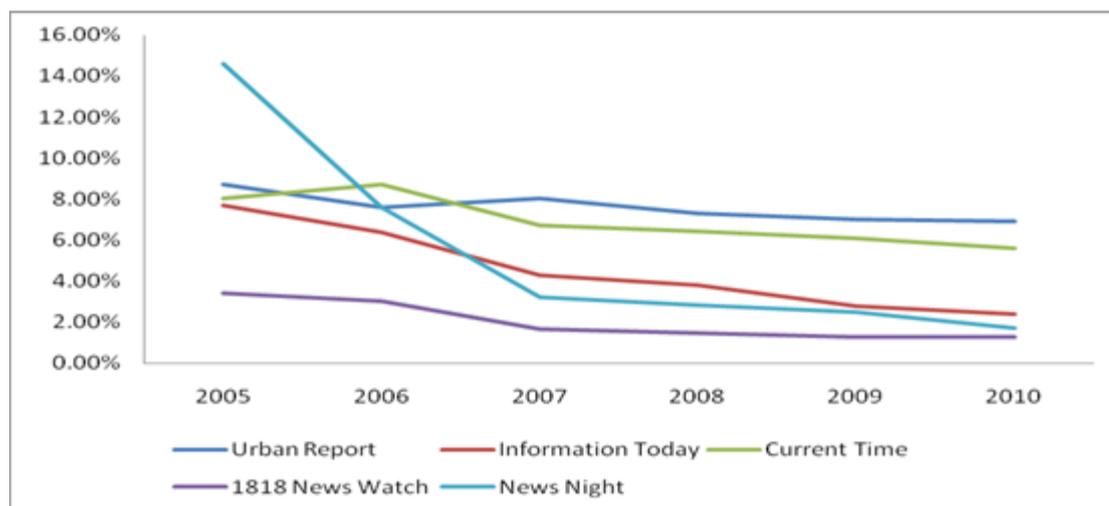
The strong sense of ‘disillusionment’ was felt by scholars and television workers alike. Chen Yang, for example, interviewed the producers and journalists from a Minsheng programme produced by a provincial television station in 2010. His research found that a feeling of disappointment and weariness permeated their working environment. For his interviewees, their daily work was widely perceived as demeaning and degrading as they were not able to produce content that fulfils news workers’ professional ideals (Chen, 2013). Professor Pan Changzhi from Zheng Zhou University, as one of the very few Chinese scholars who frequently participates in the design and production of Minsheng programmes (including *Zero Distance*), also believes that this television format is declining rapidly. However, he argues against academia’s criticism of the Minsheng programme based on Western media theories and unrealistic ideals

while ignoring the particular political situation and institutional structure of China's media system. "People are attracted to a Minsheng programme because of its honest and direct depiction of Chinese society", as he said at the Fifth National Forum of Minsheng Programmes, "but to achieve this is difficult and many [news workers] have been cursed at full blast by their leaders precisely because they try to do this.." (Pan, 2010, paragraph 21).

Between 2005 and 2010, the viewership of Minsheng programmes decreased gradually on a national scale. Chart 1 illustrates the ratings of five provincial stations' flagship Minsheng programmes (*Urban Report* in Henan Province, *Information Today* in Hebei, *Current Time* in Anhui, *1818 News Watch* in Zhejiang and *News Night* in Jiangxi). The ratings of *Zero Distance*, between 2004 and 2010, decreased from 21.1% (Wang, 2005: 532) to 6.5% in Nanjing (Wang, 2011c: 582). Many reasons might have contributed to the decline in viewership. The general decrease in television viewership, for example, is one reason as more and more Chinese people are turning towards digital means of communication for information and entertainment. According to *China TV Rating Yearbook's* statistics, however, the decline in television viewership is relatively slow as Chinese people on average watched the television for 2 hours and 54 minutes a day in 2005, 2 hours and 51 minutes in 2010 and 2 hours and 41 minutes in 2014 (Wang, 2016b: 20). Second, the total market share of local stations' non-satellite channels (which produce most Minsheng programmes) decreased from 45% to 31.1% between 2005 and 2010, as increasingly more Chinese people are attracted by provincial satellite channels for entertainment programmes (ibid., 28). Third, during this period, the total number of Minsheng programmes in China increased by about 10%, which might further divide the audiences. However, the primary factor that led to the fall of the once widely popular television format, the one that is widely argued by media practitioners

and scholars, is the increasing lack of attraction of its content. As asserted by Yu Yao, a senior reporter from Liaoning Provincial TV, that television workers' focus on the trivial, the shallow and the 'vulgar' aspects of people's lives, have caused 'visual and mental fatigue among audiences, and might make them feel repulsed or want to resist such kind of low-quality Minsheng news content' (Yu, 2009c: 80).

Chart 1. ratings of provincial stations' flagship Minsheng programmes (2005-2010) in five provinces (Henan, Hebei, Anhui, Zhejiang and Jiangxi)



Note: Produced based on statistics provided by Wang (2006b; 2007c; 2008; 2009b; 2010e; 2011c; Zhou, 2011: 34-57; Editorial committee of China Radio and Television Yearbook, 2011)

Research conducted by scholars has suggested viewers' needs for an honest and comprehensive depiction of their daily lives as well as the 'genuine help' they can obtain from Minsheng programmes. Zhang and Zhu, for example, surveyed over 1,100 people in Nanjing in 2013 for their criteria of 'a popular Minsheng programme'. Their research indicates local residents most expect content that is able to 'provide useful information for people's lives', 'solve real life problems and difficulties' and 'critically approach social problems and

effectively perform media's supervision roles' (Zheng and Zhu, 2014: 339). Hou Yinzong surveyed 400 regular audiences of a Minsheng programme broadcast by Hunan Provincial TV in 2007 and found that viewers mostly value content that focuses on people's suffering, their lives and their living environments. He also found that local viewers tended to criticise and even stop watching a programme for its inability to concentrate on people's everyday problems and to produce in-depth reports or investigations (Hou, 2008). CCTV's 2012 large-scale survey, participated in by over 15,000 people from over 300 regions, found that 'knowing about news information' and 'leisure and entertainment' are the two main reasons Chinese people watch television. It also found that there was a 'salient need' (需求突出) for Minsheng programmes, and particularly those that pay close attention to people own lives and the true situation of society (Xu and Wang, 2013: 16).

5.5 The transformation of Minsheng programmes towards mainstream political news

With the purpose of promoting 'socialist morality', central Government, in the late 2000s, launched a series of movements aimed at resisting the 'vulgar trend' of cultural industries. In 2008, President Hu Jintao declared the 'anti-three-vulgarity' campaign, which officially defined the tendencies of the commercialised cultural sector towards vulgarity, low taste and damping down as a great threat to the construction of socialist culture (Sullivan, 2011: 238). From 2007 to 2012, central Government issued over 20 national notifications, policies and regulations aimed at eliminating vulgarity and reducing excessive entertainment on television screens and the Internet (e.g., SARFT, 2009; 2010c; Zhang, 2010b). The focus of the anti-vulgarity campaign, as summarised by SARFT's deputy director Hu Zhanfan, was on cultural content containing sex, lieqi, violence, excessive hedonism and individualism, extravagant lifestyles,

overnight fame, absurdity and extramarital affairs, as they are considered by the central authority to be against 'correct' and healthy moral standards and cultural values (Hu, 2007c).

Although these movements were largely targeting entertainment programmes (particularly Reality shows) that were becoming increasingly dominant in both the television industry and on online platforms (Ling, 2016: 521; Yang, 2017: 158), news-related programmes produced by local non-satellite stations also caught the attention of central leaders. According to Jin Wenxiong, the senior propaganda official in charge of monitoring works over central and local television channels, the vulgar trend of China's television sector mainly manifests itself in three aspects. They are, the 'entertainmentisation' of news, the 'marginalisation' of story-telling programmes and talk shows (from 'mainstream' cultures and lives), and the dissemination of low-taste and vulgar cultures by entertainment programmes. He criticised local television stations' tendency to focus on such content as crime, violence, sexual activities, family conflicts and urged television workers to adhere to the promotion of mainstream culture and socialist ideologies (Jin, 2012; Li and Yao, 2009).

What went in tandem with the anti-vulgarity movements was central Government's strengthening of emphasis on correlating cultural works with people's minds and their living reality. As I have explained in Chapter Three, the 'mass-line' of culture, with its focus on the integration of the Party's ideologies and people's consciousness was not only an important ideological tradition of the CPC but is still of great significance to today's ruling elites in their construction of socialist culture with positive propaganda, morality and patriotism at its core. In November 2011, the central PD, SARFT and three other central Party departments launched the '*zou zhuan gai*' (走转改) movement,

which demanded news workers apply the mass-line of culture in their daily works. 'zou zhuan gai' is an acronym and is literally translated as 'moving to the grassroots, transforming work styles and reforming journalistic prose styles'. According to the minister of the Central PD Liu Yunshan, the movement had two core purposes. First, it aimed to 'integrate the Party's opinions with public wills' (Liu, 2011, paragraph 3). News workers, according to him, should report on and explain the Party's policies, principles and achievements so they can send the Party's and Governments' voices to the masses. At the same time, they should pay close attention to the daily lives of the public in order to transmit people's needs, wants and wishes to the Party. Second, journalists should transform their reporting styles and use people's languages, cultural forms and practices in their creations in order to better attract people's attention and guide public opinion. The minister asked news workers to adhere to a down-to-earth working style, stay close to the grassroots and create touching and lifelike cultural works (Liu, 2011).

Since 2011, 'zou zhuan gai' has been a consistent focus of central Government's cultural and ideological requirements. However, the movement has not been accompanied by a relaxation of media control or an increased official tolerance of the production of 'negative content' concerning China's social and political environment. Nor has the Government made any substantial efforts to ameliorate the structural limitations local news workers confront on a daily basis. On the contrary, central Government, since the 2010s, has been consolidating its control over the cultural sector and elevating the significance of positive propaganda in media units' everyday operations (Cai, 2016:39; Qiu, 2017: 12-14). The combination of mass-line and positive propaganda determines that 'zou zhuan gai' is not able to enhance local news-related television programmes' ability to truthfully reflect ordinary lives when such

reflections 'excessively' expose the negative aspects of the political and socioeconomic environments.

Zero Distance, as one of the most influential Minsheng programmes in China, was one of the first to significantly change its content strategy under the influence of the Government's ideological requirements. In May 2009, the programme declared the 'upgrade' of its format, which, according to its newly-appointed production manager Zhang Jiangeng, aimed at extricating the programme from vulgar and trivial content, better fulfilling its propaganda roles, and enhancing its competitiveness in the digital age. The programme, accordingly, would take changes in three major aspects. First, *Zero Distance* would no longer be solely focused on ordinary people's lives and would devote a large part of its airing time to the dissemination and explanation of Government policies and leaders' activities. Second, it would gradually increase the proportion of 'positive reports' (正面报道), in particular to depict the positive influence of central/local governments' policies and Party leaders' activities on ordinary people's lives. Third, it would enhance its circulation in the digital sphere by promoting its content online, through Weibo, WeChat, search engines, etc., and by making programme viewing available on computers and mobiles phones (Chan, 2009, A3). As a consequence of the reform, the first segment of the programme was changed from 'Social News' to 'Focus', which aimed to provide concentrated coverage of events and people rather than disparate short reports. The other three components (investigation, documentary and news commentaries) remained, although with a shift of focus away from family and community 'trifles' (Chan, 2003; Su, 2009: B2).

In his research article 'Television Minsheng News: Opportunities and Challenges', Professor's Wang Xiong's analysed *Zero Distance* broadcast

during three weeks in April 2011. He identified the different foci of the programme's news coverage, investigative reports and documentaries after the reform. First, a large proportion of its first segment was devoted to the coverage of significant political activities and government policies. Events such as Jiangsu province's 'two sessions' (the provincial People's Congress and the Political Consultative Conference), the awards ceremony held by the Justice Department of Jiangsu Province and the reform of Jiangsu's Educational Department were all covered in detail. Lengthy airing time was allocated to broadcasting leaders' speeches and the explanation of events, along with interviews with citizens who invariably appraised government policies and achievements (Wang, 2017b).

Second, its investigative reports were no longer focused on local residents' family or community conflicts. Rather, they mostly featured local government's various movements and actions (such as anti-pickpocketing activities carried out by local police and the Environmental Department's penalties on various ports along Yangzi River). When 'independent' investigations were carried out with the purpose of safeguarding local people's interests, they were still limited to the supervision and exposure of wrongdoings of 'companies that manage residential communities, small private enterprises or individuals' (ibid., 96). Third, *Zero Distance* broadcast a number of documentaries with the promotion of CPC's revolutionary histories and citizens' patriotic emotions formed the main purpose (such as *A Million Troops Crossing the Yangzi River* and *Mao Zedong in Nanjing*). When documentaries featured 'normal residents', protagonists were often 'model workers' who were wholeheartedly devoted to their posts, or 'moral models' who offered help without expecting favours in return. Based on the programme's new content focus, Wang Xiong argued that *Zero Distance* was shifting from a 'Minsheng programme' to a 'current political affairs'

programme in order to enhance its recognition and influence among the leaders. Economically, however, he believed that such changes could be 'suicide' as the programme was transforming towards the economically uncompetitive type of news it originally wanted to be differentiated from (ibid., 102-105).

After three years of reform, in 2012 JPT's chairman and chief director Bo Yu announced that the elimination of 'vulgarity' had become the station's bottom-line (Chen and Zhao, 2012). A senior producer of *Zero Distance* also told me that in 2012 content concerning family conflicts, street fights and sexual activities was rarely produced, and the programme had transformed into one that focused on disseminating government policies and depicting the 'positive' aspects of people's lives (interview with a senior news editor, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2016). Such changes, however, created negative effects on its viewership. Between 2010 and 2013, the programme's annual ratings (in Nanjing) dropped from 6.8% to 4.6% (Wang, 2016: 143), which caused great panic for all employees. The same producer explained the situation,

"From the early 2010s to 2013, our ratings dropped for three years in a row. The drop was not as if my group made bad works so our time slot always had low ratings. It was like the whole programme was dying... We know where the roots of the problem were – viewers need us to solve their problems and they want to learn about what their living environments are really like. If they only want positive propaganda, why do they watch us? Good things and bad things happen every day and many things have two sides. If you only report on the good, even if you make great efforts, you still seem boring and not useful enough" (interview with a senior news editor, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2016).

According to Tian Li, since the 2009 update *Zero Distance* has received thousands of phone calls, emails and WeChat messages from viewers in the hope that the programme could refocus on the real lives of local residents rather than turning into a propaganda machine for the governments. From late 2011, producers of *Zero Distance* started to appeal to leaders at JPT (who would then report to the provincial propaganda department) in the hope of reducing their reporting on political events and government policies and to re-position the programme's focus on people's livelihoods. It was not until September 2012, when provincial leaders finally issued their approval of the conditions that all significant political events (such as important political conferences and top provincial leaders' activities) should be covered in detail and daily broadcasting of government policies should be no less than 30% of the entire airing time. In addition, the provincial propaganda department also required *Zero Distance* to adhere to positive content and to highlight the positive influence of government institutions and officials on local people's lives. With the official approval, producers can re-adopt the programme's 'entertainment strategy' (with its focus on lieqi, family and community conflicts and sexual appeals) to some extent in order to attract local audiences (interview with Tian Li, Jiangsu Provincial Television, 2017). Table 4 displays the programme arrangement and a general description of the content of *Zero Distance* on 17th February 2016.

Table 4. Programme arrangement and general content of *Zero Distance* (17th February 2016)

Segment	General content	Length
	<p><i>Zero Distance</i>'s plans to report on the upcoming 'two sessions'</p> <p>Jiangsu Provincial Government issue new policies supporting elderly citizens</p>	

Focus	<p>Jiangsu Provincial Government issue new policies stimulating the real economy</p> <p>Bus drivers help elderly pedestrian to cross the street</p> <p>Nanjing City Government implement driving school reforms</p> <p>Children accidentally set the house on fire while parents were playing mahjong</p> <p>A woman sexually seduces her neighbour in order to collect money for plastic surgery</p> <p>A woman commits suicide after a fight with husband</p> <p>Stalker found on subway</p> <p>A drunken man fights with passengers on bus</p>	22 minutes
Coverage	<p>Law enforcement team from Nanjing's Urban Management department donate blood</p> <p>Sex workers attract customers by sending WeChat messages to nearby residents</p>	11 minutes
Commentary	<p>CPC's Central Discipline Commission found corruption problems when inspecting China Development Bank</p> <p>Nanjing Bureau of Quality and Technical Supervision takes measures to enhance elevator quality in residential communities</p>	9 minutes
Story	Naked chatting scams	16 minutes

Source: reproduced from programme website: <http://v.jstv.com/ljl/>. Accessed on August 25, 2016

Like *Zero Distance*, Hubei TV station's *Jinshi Live* was also one of the earliest Minsheng programmes to undertake transitions in response to central

Government's ideological requirements. In November 2010, Hubei Provincial Propaganda Department summoned key producers from the programme and requested that *Jingshi Live* transform its focus from 'small livelihood' (小民生) to 'big livelihood' (大民生). The main focus of this transition was to ensure a correct public audience, promote official ideology, and correlate national prosperity and government's policies to people's happy and well-off lives (Chen, 2010b). Provincial leaders also demanded the programme to avert content that was 'vulgar' and 'excessively entertaining' and to ensure its role as 'the Party and the people's mouthpiece' by promoting noble thoughts, socialist values and 'advanced culture' (Liu, 2010: A2). A senior producer of the programme explained the subsequent transition of *Jingshi Live* as follows,

"The biggest change was that our protagonists changed. Before the conference, our protagonists were normal people. After it, we had to focus on governments and leaders. Even when we focus on livelihood issues, we must constantly pay attention to their social influence. When we talk about housing problems, you know, some people cannot afford a house... we have to point out that in recent years the nation has introduced many policies such as low-rent housing, public rental housing, housing funds, etc. to tell the audiences that problems are being solved. Issues such as medical care and employment must be dealt with the same way... You have to make sure you do not produce negative social influence. In some ways we did transform from 'small livelihood' to 'big livelihood' because before (the programme reform) we normally avoided such issues. Now we do talk about them, but more in a way the Government requires us to" (interview with a senior producer, Hubei Provincial Television, 2017).

From its transition, the ratings of *Jingshi Live* (in Hubei Province) also declined

sharply. Between 2006 and 2010, the programme was one of the most widely watched television shows in Wuhan City with an average annual rating of over 5.6% (Hubei Broadcasting Station, 2014: 53). After its transition, its annual ratings dropped to 4.1% in September 2011 and 3.0% in September 2013 (ibid., 58-59). When I asked about the major reasons for such a radical viewership decline, the same producer immediately blamed the reduction on the heavy propaganda reports he and his colleagues had to take and their subsequent efforts in order to 'win back' the audience,

“Of course the audiences didn't like the changes we made. At the time we were becoming increasingly similar to Hubei News, which could barely reach an audience rating of 1%. Mainstream news can't attract audiences. But the difficulty is you can never stop playing the propaganda role once the leaders start to demand you as mainstream news... What we can do really is to fulfill the tasks assigned from above and try to strive for more space so we can tell people's own things...” (interview with a senior producer, Hubei Provincial Television, 2017).

Just like *Zero Distance*, apart from undertaking the mandatory propaganda tasks (e.g., promoting key government policies and leaders' activities) and giving attention to the depiction of 'model' Party members and citizens, *Jingshi Live*, from 2013, was able to reallocate a significant proportion of its airing time to local residents' family and community lives and difficulties. The focus of its content, of course, has still been on events, people and issues that are relatively 'trivial', unusual, sensational and/or entertaining. As stated by a programme producer from Hubei Television Station, by 2014 'trivial issues' such as family disputes, prostitution, street fights and traffic accidents once again comprised over 70% of the daily content (interview with a senior programme producer,

Hubei Provincial Television, 2016).

Like *Zero Distance* and *Jingshi Live*, since the 2010s, more Minsheng programmes have increasingly been undergoing significant transformations in response to governments' ideological campaigns, and many of them seem to have experienced an immediate reduction in viewership. Anhui Provincial Broadcasting Bureau (2011), for example, launched the anti-vulgarity campaign in April 2011 and required all television stations within the province to 'determinedly resist the vulgar tendency of television programmes', 'ensure correct public guidance' and 'create a positive public opinion atmosphere'. It also demanded all news-related programmes stay away from lieqi, entertaining, sexual, and low-taste content. Immediately after the campaign, Anhui Provincial TV's flagship Minsheng programme *First Time (Diyi Shijian)* altered its content strategy towards positive propaganda and the promotion of government policies. The programme's ratings soon plummeted from 6.6% in 2010 to 3.3% and 3.0% in 2012 and 2013 respectively (Wang, 2014). Under governments' requirement, Henan Provincial TV's flagship Minsheng news' *Urban Report (Dushi Baodao)* 'updated' its content focus in early 2012 with the aim of enhancing positive propaganda and promoting exemplary models and government activities. Its viewership dwindled by nearly 50% within less than one year after the update (Lu, 2015: A4). I did not conduct interviews with television workers from stations other than JPT and Hubei Provincial TV, but the fact that my interviewees directly attributed their 'crises' to the mandatory propaganda tasks makes it not too much a stretch to argue that the same reason might have led to the decline of other similar programmes¹⁹.

¹⁹ For obvious political reasons, Chinese scholars and media practitioners, in their published works, rarely connect Minsheng programmes' sudden loss of viewership after 2011/12 to their transitions under the central and local governments' ideological demands, which makes my collection of relative 'evidence' nearly impossible.

In recent years, it has also been observed by scholars that there has been a widespread 'resurgence' of the sexual, the bizarre and the private in Minsheng programmes as television producers once again turned their attention towards people's family/community conflicts and scandals in order to make a living in the marketplace (Chen, 2017b: 52; Hu, 2016).

Conclusion

Since its emergence, the Minsheng programme has been struggling with its self-positioning as a describer and defender of people's social and political lives or a provider of entertaining information concerning people's private and family lives. The early producers of *Zero Distance* understood that people's livelihood cannot be separated from social and political affairs, and it is particularly the case in China where the influences of governments' policies and activities are ubiquitous. In order to truthfully depict ordinary people, they designed a news programme that provided intensive investigations and documentaries and aimed to produce content with 'depth'. They also invited local residents to voice their opinions concerning controversial social issues. It was largely an attempt to portray local residents as social and political being with collective opinions, wishes, values, and desires. Local government and social institutions were perceived as entities that should be supervised (although to a limited extent) so they would better respond to and safeguard local lives and cultures.

The widespread cloning of *Zero Distance* across China not only significantly promoted Minsheng programme as a television format, it also provided news workers from other television stations with the opportunity to fulfill similar ideals. However, largely constricted by central Government's emphasis on positive propaganda and the stringent control of local propaganda apparatus, Minsheng programme's attempts to depict people's social/political lives and promote

public opinions in ways that did not derive from official accounts and agendas were constantly thwarted. In addition, the intricate and pervasive ties that connect government institutions, local officials and businesses frequently rendered media enterprises powerless in exposing or criticising powerful local interests. Minsheng programmes, therefore, have to largely limit their 'investigations' over trivial issues (particularly problems with electricity/water supply and the provision of services within people's residential communities). In order to produce politically safe and economically viable cultural products in the increasingly competitive marketplace, producers of Minsheng programmes also turned towards people's private and family lives for entertaining content.

Central Government's 'anti-vulgarity' campaigns and 'zou zhuan gai' movements did not successfully enhance television news workers' adherence to the 'mass-line' of culture. On the contrary, they had transformed the programme against its original popular focus, and towards official political propaganda the Minsheng news aspired to be differentiated from. Unsurprisingly, the ratings of such programmes as *Zero Distance* and *Jingshi Live* soon declined radically and their survival as non-government funded profit-oriented shows were under severe threat. In order to avoid cancellation as a result of low ratings, producers chose to refocus on the provision of 'entertaining information' when central Government's campaigns and supervisions waned.

The decline of Minsheng programmes in China from a once popular news genre reflect two salient 'weaknesses' of China's television industry. First, the cultural sector's ability to honestly and comprehensively reflect and promote people's everyday lives and cultures is weak, which leads to 'trivial' and 'vulgar' representations of ordinary existence. Second, the Party's ability to instill its desired cultural content into people's minds is weak, and its official ideologies

and stories along are not able to provide information that is realistic, persuasive or enticing enough to attract viewers. The cultural and media sphere of any nation, however, is likely to have a strong 'center' that receives the widest attention from the masses, generates huge economic profits, create significant social and cultural influences (Turner, 2010: 23). In the next chapter, I will turn to the real 'center' of China's television sector – entertainment programmes in general and Reality television in particular. I will examine such programmes' ability to reflect ordinary people's lives and cultures as well as how their content influences ordinary people and local culture.

Chapter Six:

Celebrities and celebrity 'wannabes' – the main 'protagonists' of Reality TV and the centre of China's television industry

6.1 Reality shows: the dominant genre of television programming in China

In the last chapter, I traced the emergence, development and the recent crisis of the Minsheng programme. The increasing lack of attraction of this television format leads to the decline of provincial and city stations' territorial channels whose survival has been largely dependent on the provision of local news. Between 2005 and 2015, the combined national ratings share of the nation's around 240 provincial stations' non-satellite channels and more than 1000 city stations dropped from 39.5% to 28.5% (Wang, 2016: 24). Increasingly more such channels are deeply mired in financial crisis.

A cursory survey of current television channels in China, could lend one the immediate impression that entertainment is a prime output – there is a visible predominance of entertainment shows. As explained in Chapter Four, the production of news and information for local viewers, and the provision of entertaining content to the national audiences have been two content strategies typically followed by local territorial and satellite channels respectively, and largely as a result of China's cultural system reform. In sharp contrast to the gradual decline of regional news-related programmes, entertainment programmes have expanded considerably. Provincial stations' satellite channels (there are 37 such channels nationally), as the primary carriers of

entertainment shows, have undergone a significant increase in national market share from 17% in 2005 to 31% in 2015 (Wang, 2017b: 24). The most commercially successful local channels such as Hunan Satellite TV (HNST), Zhejiang Satellite TV (ZJST) and Jiangsu Satellite TV (JSST) have been formidable forces in the television sector whose programmes frequently challenge CCTV's leading position in national ratings.

Out of the various types of entertainment shows that have emerged in post-Mao China (e.g., festival galas, skits, talk shows, entertainment news, and so on), Reality television (RTV), which encompasses various types of programmes that emphasise the provision of entertaining, 'authentic' and 'non pre-orchestrated' content to viewers, gained widespread popularity after the astonishing success of Hunan Satellite TV's *Super Girl* (Chaoji Nvsheng) in 2004. Since the 2010s, RTV has been the de facto dominant genre of entertainment programming produced in China. In 2014, for example, 74% of all programmes aired by the nation's top five provincial channels (in terms of commercial revenues that year) were Reality TV shows (Zuo and Li, 2015: 95). In 2016, Reality shows represented the vast majority of the more than 200 entertainment shows broadcast by satellite channels (Zhang and Lei, 2016: 57). In 2017, all of the 15 most popular entertainment programmes broadcast on China's television screens were Reality shows (Fu, 2017b).

This chapter articulates the crucial emergence and development of the 'Reality television' show in China, and positions this genre of TV show in a way that reveals key political dynamics central to the formation of China's cultural policy – and alerts us to the faultlines that make for an instability that threatens the prospect of a sustainable development. Because this genre of television programme appeared in the early 2000s and since then has been produced in

large quantities every year, the chapter will not attempt to provide a comprehensive examination of its developmental situation. It will, rather, attend to three objectives that follow from the central aims of the thesis. Firstly, we will examine the facility and tendency of Reality shows to depict 'ordinary people', their daily lives and cultures. Secondly, we will identify the political frustrations generated by Reality TV on behalf of central Government (and its ideological agenda). Thirdly, an investigation will attend to the institutional rationales that make Reality TV the dominant genre of programming in China's television sector.

Reality Television (RTV) is a form of television programming that emerged in the 1990s in Western countries and became popular on a global scale at the commencement of the 2000s. Containing a wide variety of sub-genres and specialised formats, Reality television usually provides purportedly unscripted, 'authentic' and entertaining content that is derived from real people's activities (Ouellette, 2014; Hill, 2005: 2). Its programmes first appeared en masse in the early 1990s, and notably in the forms of crime, emergency services and home video programmes. Broadcast mainly by television networks in America and Europe, Reality TV in its early development tended to concentrate on sensational, dramatic and/or mysterious aspects of 'real lives' and 'real society' in order to achieve ratings (Ogdon, 2012: 29; Holmes and Jermyn, 2004: 3). What really made Reality television an 'international phenomenon', however, was the emergence of such shows as *Big Brother*, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, *Survivor* and *Pop Idol* in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These immensely popular shows demonstrated a shift of Reality television's focus away from 'existent lives in social reality' towards the presentation of competition, performance and stardom in highly 'constructed realities' (Holmes

and Jermyn, 2004: 5). They also marked the rise of global 'format franchises' as independent producers, in order to maximise profits, sell licences and pass on a whole assembly of knowledge concerning the production of a show to media entities all around the world (Moran, 2014). The overwhelming success of Reality TV on a global scale has been largely contributed to by widespread local adaptations of transnational formats.

Apart from Western formats, Reality shows that are produced by South Korea have also created a profound influence on China's television landscape. In contrast to their Western counterparts which often feature ordinary people in reality-based entertainment, television networks in South Korea (since the mid-2000s) tend to centre on famous entertainers and celebrities in game-like scenarios (Jung, 2019: 153-154). Such a celebrity focus is founded on the nation's highly-developed entertainment industry, which produces, manages and promotes showbiz idols in a large-scale and systematic manner (Shin and Kim, 2013). Since the burgeoning popularity of Korean cultural products (the phenomenon is referred to as 'hallyu' or 'Korean wave') across Asia in the late 1990s, the Korean Government has been backing the development of popular culture (Lie, 2012: 359). Many entertainment houses and television networks, in order to generate economic profits and discover potential idols, actively pursue partnerships with overseas enterprises (Guo, Byun and Zhang, 2016). China, undoubtedly, has been a major marketplace for South Korea's cultural industries.

The vast majority of successful RTV shows produced in China have been based on existing formats introduced (with or without a licence) from other nations (Keane, 2015: 93-100). Apart from the existence of innumerable foreign franchises who are eager to break into the Chinese market, the strong tendency

of domestic television stations towards copycatting is another major reason behind the heavy dependency of China's Reality shows on overseas templates. As this chapter aims to demonstrate, due to fierce economic competition, high political uncertainty and weak copyright protection, television practitioners in China often chose to copy already successful programmes in order to reduce risk. Internationally renowned Reality shows and their first popular Chinese versions, frequently become the ideal target for imitation. However, since the emergence of Reality shows in China in the early 2000s, not many international formats have been able to achieve widespread economic success, and the nation's television screens are often filled (especially in the 2010s) with a large number of 'similar' shows that belong to the same sub-categories and derive from the same original formats. As this Chapter will demonstrate, central Government's stringent ideological requirements and intricate institutional arrangements are important reasons behind such highly 'success' of Reality television formats in China.

This Chapter will award a priority to those mega-formats and 'phenomenon programmes' in China, because they are what the majority of the nation's Reality shows are based upon. Building on the analysis of how the Government's ideological requirements and institutional arrangements have been shaping the 'people and culture focuses' of China's Reality television (i.e., what type of people and what kinds of values, identities and lifestyles are being centred on by this type of programming), this Chapter will demonstrate that by converging on certain sub-genres and formats, Reality shows are not a prism of veracity with regard the life of everyday China and ordinary people, but they privilege exclusive population segments and a selective representation of their cultural life, and are visibly motivated by the maximisation of financial profit and the reduction of political risk. The analysis will be supported by edited selection

of text derived from extensive interviews with television practitioners, and will inform of both the general trends and specific programmes that illustrate the general trend. The tendency of China's Reality television to centre on exclusive types of people and cultures, at the same time, will be evaluated against the framework of central Government ideological agenda as well as significant censorship measures in order to identify the key frustrations generated by this genre of programming on the part of the Party-State's ongoing project of the construction of 'socialist culture'.

This Chapter will also investigate the institutional rationales animating the assertion of Reality television's and its dominant role in China's television industry, as unlike the Minsheng programme, there is an evidential lack of intrinsic interconnection of the Reality TV and the ordinary people it claims to represent. There is little disagreement among scholars that RTV provides strong examples of media and cultural *commercialisation* in the contemporary era, and the primary (if not sole) purpose of such format of television has been to generate popularity and profit rather than to convey social reality and stimulate a public acknowledgement of the issues that are raised by that form of broadcast media content. When television stations and cultural workers are drawn professionally to the production of this format of show, the situation necessarily entails a decrease in the value and role of programmes that award a sustained attention to people's everyday lives and the character of social reality (such as the Minsheng news). As explained in Chapter Four, China's cultural system reform has created a distinct boundary between television programmes that address current social and political affairs and those that do not. 'Non-current affairs' shows cannot only avoid exposing social and political problems that could immediately offend central and/or local government, but are also able to fully absorb capital, personnel and creative ideas that do not

belong to fully-state-owned entities. This Chapter will continue to demonstrate that in sharp contrast to the Minsheng programmes whose productions and promotions are largely reliant on television practitioners alone, Reality shows are frequently the products of joint projects participated in by both state-owned and private forces.

In order to respond the aforementioned three objectives, this chapter is structured as follows. First, it identifies how a dedication to entertainment programmes in general and Reality shows in particular has been a strategic choice of provincial satellite channels in China. Channels such as HNST did not plan to abandon journalistic activities in the early years of their operations, but rather, they were forced to stay away from social and political affairs due to the institutional arrangements of the nation's television sector. The early development of China's Reality TV will reveal how programmes that were based on two international mega formats (*Big Brother* and *Survivor*) found it difficult to survive 'politically' as their core appeals tended to contradict the Government's ideological priorities. The Chapter then examines two sub-genres of RTV most prevalent in China since the mid-2000s – talent shows (particularly singing competitions) and celebrity game/challenges shows.

An argument emerges whereby two crucial reasons why both these sub-genres of Reality shows are able to achieve widespread success in China lie in their almost complete *avoidance* of representation of ordinary people's lives and their emphasis on the creation and/or display of 'extraordinary people' (i.e., celebrities). Two representative shows (*Super Girl* and *Running Man*) fall within each sub-genre and are studied in detail, motivated by a critical requirement to account for (i) the deep involvement of non-state-owned capital in content production and marketisation, and (ii) the tendency of both programmes to

depict highly exclusive types of people and to promote values, lifestyle and identities that such kinds of people are bound up with. Central Government's containment measures, specifically targeting these two sub-genres of Reality TV, will be defined.

6.2 Reality shows – a calculated choice for provincial satellite channels

The rise of Reality TV in China was largely facilitated by provincial satellite channels' overwhelming demand for the production of entertainment programmes. Under the permission of central Government, all provincial stations were able to send one main channel through satellite-cable during the late 1990s (see Chapter Four, Section 3), and because of their national coverage, these channels soon became the most valuable assets for their mother stations.

During the early years of operation, many local satellite channels chose to put their strategic focus on both news-related programmes and entertainment shows. Hunan Satellite Television, while uplifting light-entertainment on one hand, produced a number of programmes in the late 1990s that focused on investigative reports, news commentaries and talk shows that concerned social affairs (examples included *Zero Point Tracking (Lingdian Zhuizong)*, *Evening News (Wanjian Xinwen)* and *Having Good Talks (You Hua Hao Shuo)* (Qian, 2000). Between 1998 and 2003, the double-focus on entertainment and news was also the basic strategy of the satellite channels of Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Guangdong provincial stations (Guo and Gao, 2003; Zheng, 2001; Zhang, 2001). Under the institutional arrangements of China's television sector, however, provincial satellite channels' strategies to survive (partly) on social and political news soon proved to be extremely difficult. As channels with a

national reach, it is economically undesirable for them to focus on regional news and to compete with territorial channels for local audiences. News programmes often have to focus upon current affairs on a national scale if they want to stay safely on the air (Zhang, 2011b: 55). However, the national news market has long been monopolised by CCTV, which enjoys massive financial subsidies and political support from central Government. To compete with this central level television conglomerate, therefore, local stations had to deliberately differentiate from CCTV's mainstream style, and to give particular emphasis to the provision of audience-oriented content. A predicament emerges that local stations lack the political capital to challenge central Government's dissemination and interpretation of current affairs (when significant national incidents/events occur, the central PD often require all local satellite channels to rebroadcast CCTV and Xinhua News Agency's reports), the ability to communicate with and seek protection from high-ranking officials, or the authoritative status to supervise social and political institutions. Once across the opaque Party line, they are vulnerable to 'punishments' imposed by Beijing who have been keeping a close eye on all satellite channels. In 2001, for example, HNST's talk show *Having Good Talks* was shut down permanently by SARFT for discussing homosexuals and particularly their social status, a topic that had never before been represented by Chinese television (Miao, 2011: 96). In the same year, a news programme produced by HNST broadcast a controversial report on China's economic privatisation. SARFT subsequently banned the programme and the deputy director of the stations had to step down (Chan, 2003: 165).

It did not take long for producers from provincial satellite TVs to realise an important truth about China's TV sector: uplifting entertainment is the safest

and most commercially profitable way to survive in the marketplace (Zhao, 2008). In 2004, HNTV announced its development strategy to build 'China's most dynamic television entertainment brand' and fully embraced commercial entertainment as its only core pursuit (Ouyang, 2004: 22). More than ten news-related programmes were subsequently cancelled (Liu and Wu, 2006: 117), including the popular rural-focused news magazine show *Findings in the Countryside* (Meng, 2009: 266). Being dedicated to entertainment while abandoning (or downplaying) news-related programmes also become the basic strategy of other provincial satellite channels since the early/mid-2000s. With the exception of a very few cases (such as Jiangsu Satellite TV's Minsheng programme *1860 News Eyes* (1860 Xinwenyan)), until today, no substantial breakthroughs have been made by these channels in their coverage and documentaries on current affairs.

Moving away from journalistic activities, provincial satellite channels have been able to incorporate capital, talents, ideas and platforms from 'outside the system' by working closely with private cultural enterprises. As explained in Chapter Four, central Government has created a stringently enforced demarcation between television news and programmes that do not involve journalistic activities. No domestic non-state enterprises are allowed to produce or invest in programmes that concern current political or social affairs. Under Government policy, non-state enterprises tend to converge in the field of entertainment and the numbers of domestic cultural companies specialised in this area started to grow exponentially since the early 1990s. According to the Development Research Centre of SAFRT (2008: 87), there were 2442 domestic private enterprises that gained the official production permit for audio-visual programmes in 2007, which constituted 70 to 80% of the total production units in China. Around 80% of these private companies chose to focus on the

production of entertainment programmes (ibid., 198). Within the rapidly growing 'private cultural sector' in China, internet-based companies and their digital platforms have been a particularly important resource for provincial satellite channels. Unlike the "traditional" media sector whose openness to non-state capital has been restricted under intricate and carefully planned institutional arrangements (see Chapter Four), the biggest proportion of the Chinese Internet has been run by private enterprises who are constantly controlled, monitored and censored by the Party-State (Mackinnon, 2012: 83; *The Economist*, 2016).

Although central Government prohibits the establishment of new online audio-visual providers that are not fully state-owned since 2008, the already existing private enterprises are allowed to continue their operations with an official permit (see Chapter Four, Section 4). Due to the fact that non-fully-state-owned websites in China are not allowed to undertake journalistic activities concerning social/political affairs and are only able to transmit news reports from other sources like newspapers and television (Zhang, 2014a: 63), internet-based enterprises with private backgrounds (particularly major audio-visual service providers like Tudou, Youku, IQIYI and Ku6) tend to focus on entertainment and are eager to enter the television space by collaborating with satellite channels. Since the mid-2000s, entertainment programmes in China have often been co-produced based on cooperation between state-owned and private enterprises, are promoted and provided on multiple platforms, and are accessible through both traditional and digital forms of devices.

Being devoted to entertainment, provincial satellite channels are not only able to reach a national audience but are also able to fully access private capital and their already influential digital platforms, which gives these channels a huge

competitive advantage in China's TV sector (particularly over programmes like the Minsheng news produced by territorial channels). The worldwide popularity of Reality television since the 1990s undoubtedly provided these channels with a multitude of formats and ideas that they urgently needed, and it was particularly the case that in the 2000s, more 'traditional' forms of entertainment programmes that focus on professional and well-rehearsed performances (such as galas and skits) were still monopolised by CCTV. Spearheaded by Hunan and Guangdong television stations, the early 2000s witnessed the emergence of Reality television shows in China.

6.3 The emergence and early development of RTV in China

Throughout the 2000s, Hunan TV was the leading force among provincial stations in introducing and creating hit entertainment shows. Its successful programmes were often widely replicated by other local stations and even by CCTV (Bai and Song, 2014: 5). In July 2002, the Hunan TV Economic Channel aired *Perfect Holiday (Wanmei Jiaqi)* – one of China's earliest influential Reality television shows. It was an imitation of the French programme *Loft Story*, which itself was modelled on the 'super format' *Big Brother*. *Perfect Holiday* is a housemate-elimination show which follows 12 contestants with various social and educational backgrounds who live in a luxury villa equipped with a swimming pool and modern appliances. For ten weeks, the housemates are completely isolated from the outside world and are in competition with each other in order to win an apartment worth RMB 5,000,000 (US\$ 604,000). The elimination process starts from the third week and is decided by votes cast by both contestants and the audience (by phone or online). Each week, two contestants that receive the highest nominations by their housemates are banished. But if one of them receives the highest number of votes from the audience, he or she is safe from eviction that week (Keane, 2015:106; Gong,

Zhang and Wang, 2015: 35-36). After its broadcast, *Perfect Holiday* soon became one of the most watched programmes in Hunan Province with an average rating of 10% (Yin and Ran, 2007). However, although the producers of the show tried to highlight 'positive relations' and 'group cooperation' among the contestants, depictions of housemates' schemes, scandals, and malice when being motivated by a 'grand prize' were a major selling point and an indispensable part of the format (Gong, Zhang and Wang, 2015: 36).

A survey conducted by Hunan TV suggests that while the majority of audiences (63%) held positive attitudes towards the show, 37% believed that it excessively exposed the 'dark side' of human nature (Yin and Ran, 2007). The SARFT subsequently ordered the cancellation of the second season of *Perfect Holiday* on the grounds that the show promoted 'philandering, clique-forming and intrigue' (Gong, Zhang and Wang, 2015: 36). Central Government's prohibition of the continued production of *Perfect Holiday* threw gloom over the prospect of the Big Brother format in China. Since 2003, there have been very few attempts by China's television workers to make similar programmes.

In interview, Sun Zhigang, a senior producer and director who has taken part in the production of five Reality shows for Jiangsu and Zhejiang provincial stations, articulated the dilemma:

"Perfect Holiday was based on a model introduced from abroad... The model primarily exhibits people's privacy and dramatic interaction. When you confine a dozen young people in an enclosed environment for a long time and let them compete for a big prize, you sell on schemes, romance, sex, wealth and crude instinct. Any producer would want to force human natures to the extreme and get as many dramatic scenes as possible... The problem is, to

a large extent, the advantages of such [a] model are the negative aspects of humans. You see the danger here? You are very prone to creating negative public opinions...You get banned, you then ruin your own efforts and implicate many other people.” (interview with Sun Zhigang, Zhejiang Satellite Television, 2017)

The failure of *Perfect Holiday* reflects the paradox of depicting ‘ordinary people’ in relatively ‘ordinary situations’ (several people cohabiting in a contained house is not an extraordinary experience for most Chinese people). As I have explained above, television stations’ pursuit of entertainment shows is a strategy to de-politicalise and de-socialise content in order to safely accumulate profits by refraining from reflecting, investigating or exposing people’s real social/political lives. The Western format *Big Brother* to some extent fulfils television workers’ need to create situations and depict people in a ‘socially-detached’ way (from real environments), but because of the fact that both participants and localities are relatively ‘unspectacular’, programme producers have to create sensational events, interactions and emotions in order to generate suspense, privacy, gossip and melodrama around the participated selves and their relations with others. As one of the ‘more voyeuristic formats’ of RTV (Turner, 2010: 39), *Big Brother* and its locally adapted versions have been accused, even in the West, of exploiting participants’ private affairs, promoting cut-throat competition and intrigue (Rich, 2000), and are closely associated with moral decline and low cultural tastes (Mathijs and Hessels, 2004: 63). In China where the construction of socialist morality lies at the core of central Government’s ideological agendas, and where Confucianism, with its core emphasis on harmony and virtues, still exerts powerful influence on people’s consciousness, the key ‘ingredients’ of this format can easily become its fatal weakness.

The difficulty of featuring ordinary people in competition for prizes in relatively 'unextraordinary' situations was also a major reason behind the failure of the other type of early RTV produced in China in the early 2000s – shows based on outdoor survival formats. In 2000, for example, Guangdong Satellite TV produced China's first Reality TV show – *The Great Challenge for Survival* (*Shengcun Da Tiaozhan*). The programme was largely inspired by a popular Japanese show *Air Wave Boys* and its first season featured several urban citizens' expeditions across China (outdoor activities such as expeditions were quite famous among the urban middle-class in coastal regions in the early 2000s). As Luo's (2010) intensive interviews suggest, initially producers of the show aspired to produce a travel-based documentary programme with both public education and commercial success as their primary aims. They abandoned the key entertainment elements (such as pranks, humiliation and ludicrous tasks) of the Japanese show and highlighted positive human personalities and relations by offering participants extremely low expenses ((RMB 4000 (US\$ 483) per person for a 195-days journey) in order to encourage them to tackle difficulties through cooperation and mutual help.

The first season of the programme was largely not plot-based or staged, and producers emphasised the conventional documentary style by trying to minimise their intrusion into participants' 'real survival experiences'. As economic competition intensified in China's cultural sector, however, the programme soon proved to be 'boring' due to its lack of dramatic scenes, relations or conflicts (Luo, 2010: 130-169). Since the third season (aired in 2003), the show has re-positioned itself based on the 'last man standing' format of America's *Survivor* and has re-based its emphasis on prize-hunting, elimination and competition in isolated localities (Cai, 2003: 67). Since then, the

producers have grappled with central Government ideological requirements in relation to an emphasis on the entertaining elements. Their struggles were a major reason for the demise of the show in the mid-2000s (Chen, 2006).

In 2002 and 2003, there emerged a number of Reality shows that were modelled on Survival formats (examples include *Duobao Qibing* (*Treasure Raiders*) produced by Zhejiang Satellite TV, *Xiagu Shengcunying* (*Canyon Survivors*) by Guizhou TV and *Survivor into Shangri-La* (*Zouru Xianggelila*) by CCTV), but the majority of them lasted for just one season (Yang, 2014: 519). Two major reasons that led to their short life-spans, just like *Perfect Holiday* and *The Great Challenge for Survival*, were their tendency to expose 'negative' human nature and their lack of ability to innovate under stringent ideological control (Xie and Chen, 2007: 21; Gong, Zhang and Wang, 2015: 40).

To survive politically, the then-nascent Reality television industry in China needed formats that do not focus on thoroughly exposing people's private lives in overly competitive and 'disharmonious' environments. The emergence of talent shows such as *Pop Idol* in the UK and *American Idol* in the US in the early 2000s soon proved to be more favourable objects for imitation for a number of reasons. First, although the idol format also gives primary focus to 'ordinary people', it does not fully exhibit their personal lives or relations with others. Instead, such shows emphasise 'special talents' (i.e., singing and performing on stage) that have long been considered as 'key skills' in the show-biz world. In other words, television workers no longer need to extrude commercially-viable content from participants' 'whole way of life' (in constructed situations) that are prone to being censored. Rather, focus can be placed on performances that are largely 'ideologically neutral' yet attractive to audiences

of all kinds. Second, by offering 'non-professionals' the opportunity to be trained and to perform in front of millions of audiences, such a format is more attractive than *Big Brother* and *Survivor* in that the former is based upon an even more distinct 'dream-like' transformation of ordinary people from obscurity to popular stars in the entertainment industry with fame, wealth and social status. The rise of talent shows (particularly singing competitions) as a mega-format in China's television sector was largely contributed to by the astounding success of *Super Girl* broadcast by HNST.

6.4 *Super Girl*: the first 'phenomenon' Reality show in China

The *Mongolian Cow Sour Yogurt Super Girl Singing Contest* (hereafter referred to as *Super Girl*), broadcast on HNST in 2005, was one of the most popular and economically successful programmes in China's television history. The talent show attracted over 150,000 female participants between the ages of 4 and 89, and its final episode was seen by over 400 million viewers (about one-third of China's population) (Bignell, 2013: 89). It was found that 40% of major city residents under the age of 45 watched the contest (Coonon, 2006, cited in Meng, 2009: 262), and the price of a 15-second advertisement during its final episode reached RMB 112,500 yuan (US\$ 13,906) – a figure higher than CCTV's top-price slot that year (Lu, 2009: 118). According to statistics provided by the SARFT, because of the tremendous success of *Super Girl*, HNTV's national viewership increased by 60% in 2005 and the channel's national market share reached 3.4% (over twice that of China's second most watched provincial channel in 2005) (Cao, 2006).

Largely inspired by and modelled on ITV's *Pop Idol* (UK), the widespread popularity of *Super Girl* was the success of an industrial strategy that focuses

on systematically transforming ordinary people into marketable celebrities (Turner, 2010: 33). In 2004, when HNTV decided to abandon news-related content and to completely devote themselves to entertainment (see Section 2), its then president Ouyang Changlin put forward the notion of 'new entertainment'. He required the station to focus on 'using ordinary people to entertain ordinary people' and on 'letting the viewers decide programme standard' (cited in Sun, 2005: x). The station's strategic focus was based on both an assessment of China's domestic industry and the global entertainment trend. On the one hand, HNTV was determined to break CCTV's predominance in featuring professional celebrities in arts variety programmes (综艺节目) because as a local channel it could not match the central station's appeal (to professional artists) or expertise in such type of programming. HNTV's own celebrity variety show the *Citadel of Happiness* (*Kuaile daben ying*), which was launched in 1996, went through a decline in the early 2000s. On the other hand, according to a programme director of HNST, the station has been well-informed about successful international programmes, and particularly the rapidly growing formats of Reality shows. Since the early 2000s, for example, it has been sending a large number of producers to Europe (particularly the UK) and America every year in order to learn from Western experiences, and it has more than 100 employees who specifically focus on studying and developing creative ideas for Reality shows (interview with a senior programme director, Hunan Satellite Television, 2017).

Interview research correspondence with producers and programme directors from HNST in 2016, revealed that most of them seemed to be candid concerning the 'criticism' that many TV channels' growth and prosperity has largely been based on imitating international formats. At the same time, they

are proud of the fact that out of the large number of satellite TV channels in China, HNTV is the only one that consistently adapts and markets these formats into national hits. A senior director conveys this:

“Sometimes the media says we earn our fortune through copycatting. To some extent it is true. However, the important thing is, we thoroughly localise the introductions through our professional teams, our understanding of the market and Chinese audience. This is also crucial to our success and very few stations can do it” (interview with a senior programme director, Hunan Satellite Television, 2017).

The success of *Super Girl* in 2005 should be largely due to Hunan TV’s professionalisation in the field of entertainment and China’s ‘relaxed’ institutional environment that favours non-political/social programmes. Four parties played crucial roles in the design, production and promotion of the show: HNTV, EE-Media, Mongolian Cow Group, and various territorial TV stations from outside of Hunan Province (where HNTV is located). EE-media (Tianyu Chuanmei) is an entertainment company affiliated to the Hunan TV station. Co-established in 2004 by the Hunan Entertainment Channel and the Beijing-based private company NOVA Media Group, EE-Media was responsible for the training and management of contestants in the singing contest. In order to fully exploit the economic values of would-be celebrities, all finalists and other commercially promising participants were required to sign an exclusive contract with the company that would last for eight years (Shenyang Daily, 2006). As the sponsor of *Super Girl*, Mongolian Cow Group (Mengniu Jituan), a top private milk seller in China, was deeply involved in the design and promotion of the show.

A deputy director of Happy Communication (the Advertising Department of HNST) who took part in the marketing process of *Super Girl* recalled that although Mongolian Cow only directly sponsored HNTV with RMB 20 million for the naming right, it spent over RMB 100 million and dispatched tens of thousands of employees in organising and promoting the contest (which was closely packaged with the company's name and products). The regional auditions of *Super Girl*, for example, were primarily designed and organised by the milk company, and it was HNTV's responsibility to cover the selection processes and broadcast them to national audiences. As a calculated commercial strategy, the company chose five cities (Guangzhou, Changsha, Zhengzhou, Hangzhou and Chengdu) where the regional dairy markets were most important and required all participants to buy one product before they participated in auditions. In order to expand media coverage of the contest, HNTV also established cooperative relations with five territorial channels in these five cities, which unprecedentedly broke the territorial boundaries of China's television sector. Exclusive coverage rights of the local contests (in their respective regions) were offered to these channels, and they were allowed to keep all income gained through selling advertising slots. As the main designer and broadcaster of the show, HNST was the centre that integrated the above-mentioned entities in a commercially efficient manner. In order to maximise the influence of the show, the channel (along with Mongolian Cow Group) also spent tens of millions of yuan in sponsoring reports on China's influential websites (such as Sina and Souhu), generating topics and organising activities in major online platforms (particularly Baidu Tieba) (interview with a deputy director, Hunan Satellite Television, 2017). According to Ouyang Changlin (the president of HNTV), the success of *Super Girl* in 2005 was a result of 'Hunan Broadcasting Station's excellent leadership and powerful innovation capacity,

various brands and high-quality platforms' (Ouyang, 2006: 3). However, such large-scale production-promotion strategy would be impossible without the nature of *Super Girl* as a 'de-political' and 'de-social' programme so it can be invested, produced and independently reported on by private capital, and so is able to temporarily break down the territorial and administrative barriers of the nation's cultural system.

Launching its premiere on March 19th and the final episode on August 26th, the over five-month-long singing contest basically comprised of two stages: regional auditions (海选) and national contests. The regional selection process took place simultaneously in the aforementioned five cities. In spite of the fact that the singing competition was open to women of all ages, perhaps for obvious reasons, the vast majority of participants were young women. During the preliminary auction, each contestant was given around 30 seconds to perform, and it was up to professional judges whether they were selected for the first regional rounds. Then, contestants needed to go through another two rounds of competition until 20 of them were chosen by judges in each city for the regional finals. Subsequently, the important audience participatory mechanism voting system was activated. Viewers were invited to vote for their favourite contestants through mobile phone text messages. In the regional finals, it was the audience's choice that solely determined competition results. The cost of each text message vote was RMB one yuan (each mobile phone number can cast 15 votes per day), and the voting system was based on a profit-sharing contract between the Hunan television system (particularly HNTV and EE-media) and telecom companies (with 85% going to the former and 15% to the latter) (Keane, 2007: 122).

A total of 15 candidates (three from each region) entered the national competition which took place in Changsha, Hunan Province. At this stage, apart from the very last contest, the elimination process was determined by three parties: professional judges, home viewers and popular judges. For every round of the competition, one contestant with the fewest votes from the audience and one whose performance was ranked as the least satisfactory by the professional judges would face each other in a 'PK' (Player Kill). It was up to the popular judges (which consist of previously eliminated contestants chosen by EE-media in order to continue their media exposure) to decide which one will be eliminated. The PK process was full of suspense as over 30 popular judges, one after another, walked towards the two contestants and put their ballots into a box placed in front of both people (Yang, 2014: 523). The process was also filled with dramatic yet 'harmonious' emotions as crying, hugging and seemingly 'heartbroken departures' between remaining contestants and their eliminated 'sisters' were often the key focus of the camera. After five rounds of eliminations, three girls entered the national final. Like the regional finals, the rankings of the remaining three contestants were once again solely determined by views' votes. Eventually Li Yuchun, a 21-year-old from Chengdu gained 3.5 million votes in the final match and won the national championship. She was followed by 20-year-old Zhou Bichang (3.27 million votes) and 20-year-old Zhang Liangying (1.35 million votes) (Clark, 2012: 128).

The immense popularity of *Super Girl* has generated much interest among scholars and media practitioners. Many look at this entertainment show as a progressive force of China's cultural industry that might contribute to the 'empowerment' of ordinary people in various ways. One notable viewpoint that was raised, especially in 2005 and 2006, concerned the possibility that the competition's voting system would propel political democracy when both media

units and Chinese people, once having experienced the 'benefits' of universal votes, would pursue similar mechanisms in political and social spheres (e.g., Zhao, 2005; Cui, 2005; Xiong, 2005b). Such a notion, however, soon disappeared when home-viewers' voting for talent shows was banned by central Government in 2007 (see page 239, this section). Many scholars, since then, have tended to focus on people's engagement with political/social issues when they gather together to discuss and debate about their favourite idols. Wu (2014), for example, analysed a total of 545 posts on an Internet forum established and operated by HNTV for the *Super Girl* contest. He found that although the majority of online discussions concerned 'superficial entertainment topics' irrelevant to public issues, viewers and fans do sometimes touch on 'deeper' topics such as television producers' manipulation and exploitation of contestants as well as allegedly privileged treatment of affluent candidates due to corrupted selection procedures.

Sun (2009) highlights online and off-line campaigns organised by national finalists' fans in order to protect their idols against (what they perceive as) unfair treatment by professional judges. He believes that such grassroots-based and self-organised activities might denote the rise of civil society in China that supervises powerful institutions such as media units. Huang (2014b) provides several examples of acts of resistance employed by netizens concerning government officials' criticism of the 'vulgar nature' of the singing contest. His study shows that in their strategies to protect *Super Girl* from cancellation, Chinese young people demonstrate their will to protect their own beloved programme against Government censorship. Apart from their close attention to the possible public engagement of 'civil issues' driven by their passion for and enthusiasm about the singing contest, scholars and media workers also tend to focus on the 'cultural' implications of the programme. Beijing News, one of the

most influential local newspapers in China, describes the Success of *Super Girl* as 'a reaction of popular culture against elite culture'. Quoting the comments made by three famous cultural critics, the newspaper argues that the programme marks the rise of diversified cultures that belong to the masses and the decline of official ideologies sanctioned by the Government (Zhao, 2005). The idea that because the competition was 'universally participated in' and idols 'democratically chosen', the winners of the competition to a large extent embody the values, lifestyles, aspirations and identities that belong to the masses has been widely raised. A frequently mentioned example is the champion of the show – Li Yuchun – a tall, short-haired so-called 'tomboy' who never wears skirts, stereotypical gendered dresses or cosmetics. Her image is at some distance from traditional and modern mainstream conceptions of female beauty in China, and her success is believed to have a motivating power for many women to pursue different forms of values and lifestyles (particularly those related to femininity and sexuality) (Yue and Yu, 2008; Cui and Zhang, 2017).

The aforementioned scholars and media practitioners, in their attempt to identify the social and political implications of *Super Girl*, tend to ignore the fact that HNST's dedication to entertainment is a calculated choice in order to stay away from social and political issues. In sharp comparison with the Minsheng programmes whose survival has been largely dependent on their ability to protect people's interests and depict people's real lives, *Super Girl* was a sheer commercial show with absolutely no intention of making any political impact. It is therefore important not to overstate the accidental political/social functions of a talent show while ignoring its primary entertaining effects. It has been identified by more comprehensive empirical research concerning fans of the singing contest (as compared with those that highlight selective utterances,

posts, activities, etc.) that they engage in activities mainly for the purpose of supporting their idols. It is only on rare occasions when their beloved singers are found to be 'mistreated' do they tend to discuss the institutional problems of the entertainment industry (Yang, 2009; Wang, 2007b). Devoting a considerable amount of time and money to entertainment, they are less likely (rather than more likely) to pay attention to public issues that are not about their favourite stars. In addition, because *Super Girl* contestants are bound by long and mandatory contracts, fans have a strong tendency to avoid challenging Hunan TV's exploitative activities (especially after the competition) in order to protect their idols' future careers.

Yang (2012), for example, conducted one of the few prolonged and intensive studies concerning fan's activities in China. Focusing on 'yumi' (the name used by Li Yuchun's over two million fans when they refer to themselves), she found that the frequent activities this group of people organise collectively are canvassing both online and offline for votes (during the competition), promoting Li Yunchun's music works (through such means as voting online, paying fees to various music charts, publishing advertisements, purchasing and selling albums, etc.), attending and promoting musical concerts, purchasing commercial endorsed products, and maintaining Li Yuchun's public image. It was also found that many fans are willing to become free labourers and 'cash cows' of Li Yuchun's company as they voluntarily purchase overly-expensive albums/theatre tickets in order to help their idol gain better treatment over other stars. As pointed out by Meng (2009), intellectuals' collective indulgence in the positive and progressive political functions of *Super Girl* is a highly problematic one, and their 'fantasies' are likely to reinforce the status quo (i.e., television stations' relinquishment of social and political responsibilities) rather than contribute to the development of programmes that directly engage in public

issues.

Also problematic is the notion that because *Super Girl* has an unrestricted application requirement (apart from that contestants have to be female), the widespread popularity of the show has marked the rise of 'ordinary people's own cultures'. First, although it is undeniable that the contest has provided an opportunity for ordinary people to come to the centre of China's cultural sphere, in HNST's strategy to gain market competitiveness, only those who possess qualities and abilities that are desirable for commercial entertainment can rise from the grassroots level. For contestants of *Super Girl*, it is their ability and potential to become professional singers/idols that constitute the main evaluation standard. As Liu Chang, a senior producer who was the managerial authority over the recruiting process of the 2006 and 2009 edition of *Super Girl*, candidly explained their rationale:

"Regardless of profession, appearance or wealth, we let everyone participate as long as they are over 18 years old. This reflects our respect for ordinary people and motivates more people to take part in it. However, *Super Girl* is a singing contest, our ultimate aim is to discover new stars... If you do not exhibit high levels of singing ability and stage manner (舞台魅力), or if your image is not likeable, it's really hard for you to pass... Any games have rules and those that do not fit the rules will be eliminated. Our rule is that we choose the girls that are attractive to the industry..." (interview with Liu Chang, Hunan Satellite Television, 2017).

After the first few rounds of regional auditions and competitions when contestants were reduced from over 150,000 to 100, it was professional judges'

evaluations that played the determinate role and each contestant was given an extremely short time span (30 seconds of singing in the preliminary selection process and a few minutes in the elimination process) to impress the judges. It is therefore not surprising that, as observed by Sun (2005), only those who were young, with good singing ability and attractive appearance were able to enter the regional finals. In other words, during the filtering process in which more than 99.9% of 'ordinary people' were sifted out, people's cultures, identities and personalities hardly matter if they do not exhibit a certain extent of potential to be a professional idol. Without at least entering the regional finals, very few contestants who were eliminated early were able to attract the media's or viewers' attention.

It is indeed true that when potential 'idols' emerged from different regions, and when media exposure grew and their fan-groups formed, the less than 0.1% of participants' lives, personalities, backgrounds, past experiences, etc. began to enter the public limelight and attract widespread attention. However, having transformed into media spectacles, these future stars' (especially the national finalists') personal stories and anecdotes also became important resources that were constantly excavated and disseminated by the investors of Super Girl as a crucial market strategy. The Editorial Office of HNST, for example, established a publicity team for the show which contains more than 60 employees.

Throughout the singing competition, the team's core responsibility was to persistently create and promote 'stories' about popular contests' personal lives that went beyond their performances on live television (interview with a senior programme director, Hunan Satellite Television, 2017). Such 'inside stories' then became topics that were discussed, probed into and promulgated by avid viewers, fans and other media units across China. Joined together, different

forces provide 'a demystifying, behind-the-scenes glimpse of the spectacles as the latest spectacle' which largely contributed to the influence and popularity of the show (Andrejevic, 2004, cited in Meng, 2009: 265). Such information about popular contestants, undoubtedly, to some extent reflected their everyday lives, values, dreams and aspirations as 'ordinary people' before transforming into well-known names. However, due to the fact that these future stars had already become celebrity-commodities, information about their personal lives as circulated by the mass media is necessarily strongly biased. HNST obviously does not want to tell everything about its contestants, but to focus on those stories that can help boost image. Other commercial media units, as noted by Meng (2009), also tend to concentrate on information with great marketing potential. It is therefore not surprising that topics that were most likely to attract the media's attention about contestants' 'ordinary lives' were personal gossip such as love stories and sex scandals, largely with the intention to fulfil people's voyeuristic desires (Liu, 2009).

Second, *Super Girl* is a 'dream-chasing' and star-making show based on the instant transformation of people from 'ordinary individuals' into commercial stars. It is axiomatic to say that the aspirations and values the show strongly promotes are fame, wealth, status and all the other 'advantages' that are closely associated with the 'fantasy life' of Western-style pop idols. It offers an opportunity for 'instant success' in the cultural industry, so people can depart from their ordinary existence rather than re-affirming the value of everyday lives. The winners of the singing competition, in spite of their ordinary origins, instantly become household names. Followed and idolised by many, they now belong to the exclusive social category of 'celebrity'. Embarking on careers as professional singers and actors, whether these once ordinary individuals can continue to embody ordinary people's dreams, aspirations, values and identities

is highly questionable. What is certain, however, is that when idol-based shows like *Super Girl* proliferate in China, they will entice increasingly more young people to take such programmes as opportunities to achieve overnight stardom in the entertainment industry.

For the central leaders in China, *Super Girl's* tendency to promote overnight fame, instant wealth and pop star status constitutes a main reason why it is perceived as 'vulgar' and culturally misleading. In 2006, the then standing committee of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the former heads of both the Central PD (Central Propaganda Department: see p. 105) and Ministry of Culture Liu Zhongde attacked the show as 'poison for the youth' and believed that central Government 'must strengthen their administration of this kind of programme'. According to him, the 'poisonous effects' of *Super Girl* largely lie in its 'misguidance of both participants and viewers' because 'it makes them feel like they can rise to fame and make a great fortune overnight'. 'The higher the ratings *Super Girl* achieves', he asserted, 'the more poisonous its effects will be' (cited in Peng, 2006, paragraph 7).

After Liu Zhongde made his negative comments, the leaders of HNST immediately went to Beijing with the purpose of persuading the SARFT not to cancel the show that brought its producers and investors a net income of at least RMB 750 million (US\$ 92.7 million) in 2005 alone (interview with a senior programme director, Hunan Satellite Television, 2017). Under central Government approval, the provincial channel was able to produce the commercially successful 2006 *Super Girl* without significantly changing the format. However, because of the popularity of *Super Girl*, a large number of spin-offs soon mushroomed and filled China's television screens. It is estimated

that, in 2006, there emerged over 500 talent shows aired by central and local TV stations (Liu, 2006). Just like *Super Girl*, the most popular ones (such as Shanghai Dragon TV's *My Hero (Jiayou Haonaner)* and Jiangsu Provincial TV's *Absolute Singing (Juedui Changxiang)*) were the highest rating programmes nationally and each attracted hundreds of thousands of young people who aspired to become stars in the showbiz world. The rapid proliferation of talent shows soon triggered stringent censorship measures from Beijing. In 2006 and 2007, SARFT issued a series of regulations aimed at curbing the over-production and vulgar trend of entertainment programmes. It was stipulated that every satellite channel could only hold and air no more than one 'mass-selecting' talent show (大众选秀) every year and the broadcasting time of each show should not exceed two months. Each episode of a talent show should be aired for no more than 90 minutes and not within the 'golden hours' (19:30-22:30).

All home voting activities are banned, and only audiences on the premises (i.e., within the studio or the stadium) would vote for contestants. A number of regulations concerning content arrangements were also issued, such as that talent shows need to highlight contestants' positive outlooks and values while reducing the depiction of their backgrounds, private lives and gossip, and professional judges should avoid making sarcastic comments, lavish appraisals or salacious remarks (SARFT, 2006; 2007b).

According to Liu Chang (a senior programme producer from HNTV) who took part in the production of 2006's *Super Girl*, central Government's regulatory measures proved to be a "heavy blow" (沉重的打击) to talent shows in China. Being unable to stimulate the audiences through mass voting and confined by

strictly enforced regulations concerning airing time and content arrangements, even Hunan TV found it difficult to produce a commercially profitable talent show. In addition, because of the Sichuan earthquake that took place on May 12th 2008 (after the disaster SARFT banned all television entertainment for two months) and the Beijing Olympic Games (which drew people's attention away from other events), Reality TV shows entered a sharp decline (interview with Liu Chang, Hunan Satellite Television, 2017). In fact, from 2007 to 2010, the development of RTV in China stagnated. Most of those television stations who continued making talent shows did not achieve satisfactory ratings. Instead, it was karaoke-style programmes that test participants' memory of lyrics or tones and sports game shows featuring contestants taking on challenges based in large pools of water that became most popular (Keane and Liu, 2009: 250-251; Gong, Zhang, and Wang, 2015: 80-89). However, none of these shows gained nation-wide popularity. According to the same producer, there are important cultural reasons why these shows are unable to match with *Super Girl*. As he said:

“To a large extent, *Super Girl* is a 'dream programme' (梦想的节目). It fulfils ordinary people's dreams of becoming stars. It allows ordinary people to choose their own idols. It makes their voices count. Those are very important reasons why this programme could be so popular among ordinary people... Yet it was destroyed by regulations, the government want you to focus more on performance and less on the cultural aspects...When you look at shows like *I Love Remembering Lyrics* and *Just Go*²⁰, what do they have? They focus on performances, abilities and sexy girls. They don't offer dreams, do they? Around the 2010s, few Reality shows that only pay attention to ordinary

²⁰ Just Go (Nansheng Nvsheng Xiangqianchong) is game show featuring young contestants who undertake physical challenges in large pools of water or mud.

people succeed, right?” (interview with Liu Chang, Hunan Satellite Television, 2017).

6.5 Reality television in the 2010s

Into the 2010s, ambitious local channels began to purchase formats in order to fully harness creative ideas, expertise, knowledge and talent from powerful international corporations as well as to avoid potential legal problems. In China’s entertainment market where any hit show is likely to be immediately cloned on a massive scale, being the first to gain the ‘exclusive right’ to an already successful international Reality show is also an effective way to prevent imitations and attract advertisements. In 2010, Shanghai Dragon TV launched *China’s Got Talent*, which was like an authorised version of *Britain’s Got Talent* purchased from Fremantle Media – the owner of the global Got Talent format. After the economic success of the show, leading provincial stations such as HNTV, Jiangsu TV and Zhejiang TV all started to proactively seek cooperative relations with format franchises. In 2012, Zhjiang Satellite TV (ZJST) aired the hugely popular *The Voice of China*, which successfully lifted China’s Reality shows out of years of stagnation. This talent show was China’s first RTV programme that completely separated its production from the broadcasting process. Canxing Production Corporation, a Shanghai-based private company that purchased The Voice format from Talpa Global in Holland, was the primary designer, producer, promoter, contestants’ trainer and the copyright owner of the show.

Providing the broadcasting platform and also undertaking part of the commercial promotion works, ZJST worked closely with Canxing under a revenue-sharing agreement (Chen, Zhang, Wang, 2015: 25). As a singing competition, the show’s format differed from *Super Girl* in notable aspects. For

instance, the audition process of *The Voice of China* was based on 'blind selections' (i.e., coaches sit in rotating chairs with their backs facing the stage), which supposedly made contestants' singing ability the 'sole criteria' for evaluation. In order to recruit singing talent, the producers sent over 40 directors all around the nation in search of contestants rather than employing large-scale auditions (which were stringently inhibited by central Government since 2007). Second, the performance of the four professional judges constituted a major selling point of the show. Reportedly spending over RMB 20 million (US\$ 3.2 million) on recruiting four 'first-tier' professional singers (Liu Huan, Na Ying, Yu Chengqing and Yang Kun) from the mainland and Taiwan, producers wanted to take full advantage of their celebrity status, fan bases and professional expertise (Yu, 2017). Throughout the competition, the four celebrities played a significant role. They were not only the judges of the contestants, but also personal coaches who helped to cultivate them on a 'transformative journey' from obscurity to pop stars. As pointed out by Xia (2016), the show's construction of well-known celebrities as ordinary 'friends' and 'teachers' who compete and exchange banter with each other when choosing their favourite singing talents, and who establish close relations with their 'students' are major appeals of the singing contest. Third, *The Voice of China* put great emphasis on the creation of audio and visual 'spectacles'. It spent tens of millions of yuan on building the stage and purchasing sound equipment. It also invited the top musical bands, audio directors and camera teams in China to ensure the quality of the show.

The Voice of China was a huge commercial success. Its first season attracted over 520 million viewers on TV and the Internet combined (He, 2012). The highest price for a 15-second commercial time slot reached RMB 1.2 million (US\$ 195,000), and the show earned an estimated RMB 1 billion in advertising

revenue to ZJST (Week in China, 2013). Since 2013, talent shows in general and singing competitions in particular once again multiplied in China. In 2013, almost every satellite channel aired at least one singing contest (Sun and Wang, 2015:28). In 2015, 43 music competition programmes were listed by 19 provincial satellite channels (Gorfinkel, 2018: 62). Although these shows had different formats, they can be subsumed under two categories on the basis of participants. First, there are ones like *The Voice of China* that recruit ordinary people as contestants and famous celebrities as judges and/or coaches (examples include *The X Factor: China's Strongest Voice* by HNST, *My Chinese Star* by Hubei Satellite TV and *Duets* by Beijing Satellite TV). The second group contains those that recruit professional singers as contestants (such as *I Am a Singer* by HNST, *Music Up* by Anhui Satellite TV and *Masked Singer* by Jiangsu Satellite TV). “In recent years, it is almost impossible to make a hit show without big stars”, according to director from Hubei TV who blamed the floundering of *My Chinese Star* on the lack of influence of its professional judges (interview with a senior programme director, Hubei Provincial Television, 2016).

In recent years, another type of RTV has overtaken music competitions and become increasingly dominant on China's television screens – shows that feature celebrities who play games and/or undertake light challenges. These types of programmes are mostly based on formats introduced from South Korea (with or without licences), the nation that is more culturally similar to China (compared with Western countries) and whose commercial entertainment has cast a heavy influence on Chinese people since the late 1990s. Before the 2010s, the impact of South Korea's cultural industries on China mainly resided in the domains of television dramas and pop music (Cho and Zhu, 2017: 2334). Since 2012, largely due to the huge popularity of HNST's *Dad! Where Are We Going?* and ZJST's *Running Man*, China's television practitioners began to

imitate Korean Reality shows on a mass-scale. Both of these two phenomenon programmes are adaptations of shows that were previously successful in Korea, and both focus almost exclusively on celebrities. *Where Are You Going Dad?* which is based on Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation's (Korea) *Dad! Where Are We Going?* depicts five celebrity fathers and their children who travel to distant locations (usually China's countryside and foreign tourist attractions) with the emphasis on how the pairs interact as they face a series of game-like challenges.

Providing a then-rare opportunity for ordinary people to scrutinise famous people's 'family lives', the Chinese show immediately became a major hit and gave rise to a multitude of copycatting programmes in China (Wong, 2013; Keane and Zhang, 2017: 639). In 2016, however, the SAPPRFT banned children, and in particular those of celebrities, from participating in Reality shows with the purpose of protecting them from the pitfalls of 'overnight fame' (Qin, 2016). This prohibitive policy put an end to the production of the parent-child type of Reality shows in the television sector. Programmes that concentrate on the portrayal of 'grown-up celebrities' who take part in various challenges and games, however, have been thriving. *Running Man*, as the epitome of such a type of Reality show, has been the most-watched entertainment programme nationally every year since its debut in 2014.

6.5.1 *Running Man*: a programme designed for the depiction of celebrities

Co-produced and broadcast by (ZJST), *Running Man (Benpaoba Xiongdì)* is a celebrity game show introduced by South Korea's media company Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS). Before the Chinese version was produced, SBS's original version had already accumulated certain popularity among young Chinese netizens. In June 2014, ZJST formally established a cooperative

relationship with SBS, and the Korean company became deeply involved in the content production and takes a certain proportion of the commercial profits of the Chinese show. During the production of the first season, for example, two top Korean scriptwriters were hired and sent to China by SBS. They, along with the Korean *Running Man* production team (which was constituted of 50 people) took part in the production of the Chinese show. Seven well-known Korean entertainers were also flown to China and appeared in the Chinese show as 'guest stars'. According to a production manager at ZJST, SBS played the 'primary role' in designing, shooting, screenwriting and editing the first five episodes while the Chinese team (which consisted of around 300 people) were carefully taught and guided as 'students'. As the Chinese producers from ZJST matured, from the sixth episode of season one increasingly less assistance was needed from their Korean counterparts (interview with a production manager, Zhejiang Satellite Television, 2017).

Apart from the Korean television company, ZJST also works closely with other domestic and foreign enterprises in the production and promotion of the show. Apart from selling commercial breaks to the highest bidders, *Running Man* is a programme teeming with product placements. Brands such as Volkswagen (that spent RMB 130 million yuan on purchasing the show's name rights), Suning.com and Hailan Home (two private enterprises in China which combined spent over RMB 200 million) included their products as prizes, clothing, transportation, rewards, gifts, etc (Cai, 2015: B1). According to the aforementioned programme manager, these large commercial sponsors were frequently involved in the design process of the *Running Man's* scripts and arrangements in order to better promote their brands/products. Vivo, a private telecommunication company and a main sponsor of the show, co-established

with ZJST the official website of the *Running Man* New Blue Net (*Xinlanwang*). It provides online viewership of previously broadcast content and previews of future episodes as well as highlights of Vivo's product replacements (interview with a programme producer, Zhejiang Satellite Television, 2017). In order to both generate profit and optimise the online promotion and viewership of *Running Man*, in addition to New Blue Net, ZJST also sold the programme's broadcasting rights to six major Internet-based companies in China that provide audio-visual services (IQIYI, Youku, Tencent, Souhu, Letv and PPTV). According to statistics provided by Xinhua.net (2015a), during the nearly three months when the programme was on the air (from October 10th 2014 to January 1st 2015), IQIYI alone generated an online viewership of over 740 million.

The success of *Running Man* in China was also contributed to by its seven-star emcees (MCs): Deng Chao, Wang Zulan, Angelababy (Yang Ying), Wang Baoqiang, Li Chen, Chen He and Zheng Kai. These celebrities were carefully selected by ZJST and SBS under three major considerations. First, all of them are well-known names in China with big fan bases. According to Yu Hangying, the chief producer of *Running Man*, choosing big stars was a necessity because under the fierce competition of China's entertainment market, the programme has to attract immediate attention in order to stand out (Huang, 2014c). Second, all of the MCs are actors/actresses, and they therefore are able to both 'play themselves' freely in front of the camera and play their 'character selves' assigned by the producers (Mao, 2015). Third, the seven celebrities were carefully chosen based on their personalities and temperaments. According to the Cen Junyi, one of the chief directors of the show, celebrities were selected according to several 'categories' that had been proved by the Korean version as effective in creating dramas, generating chemistry and attracting audiences, which included 'macho big brother', 'beautiful and adorable lady', 'gagman', etc

(Zhang, 2014b).

Apart from the seven who undertook the role as constant protagonists, *Running Man* also frequently invites other pop idols from the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan to participate as 'guests'. All stars involved are encouraged (the seven hosts are obliged by contract) to regularly use their personal microblogs to promote the programme, and their huge fan groups on the Internet guarantee the effectiveness of such promotion. It is estimated that during the three months when the first season of *Running Man* was on the air, topics concerning the programme generated a viewership of nearly 15 billion on microblog platforms (Xin, 2015).

For *Running Man*, celebrities' activities constitute the core of its content production and its major selling point. To a large extent, all the works done by the Chinese and Korean production teams are primarily for the purpose of highlighting the 'real' images and personalities of celebrities. As a producer of the show states:

"People watch our show because they want to see stars. They want to know what these stars who normally stand high above the masses (高高在上) are like in real life. It is as simple as that. It is our task to present these stars to the audience in a detailed and down to earth (接地气) manner...Each MC has a small camera crew, a producer and several other working staff. Our cameramen follow them almost 24 hours a day. Apart from the toilet, we follow them wherever they go...Although each episode is only 90 minutes long, we usually accumulate over 1000 hours of raw material for editing" (interview with a programme producer, Zhejiang Satellite Television, 2017).

Featuring well-known celebrities as protagonists, the programme is able to overcome some of the 'ideological pitfalls' of previously produced Reality shows that depicted the co-existence of ordinary people in confined localities. Unlike *Perfect Holiday* or *The Great Challenge for Survival*, there are no grand prizes, moral dilemmas or cut-throat competition involved in *Running Man*. Being paid a huge amount of money and appearing on a good platform for media exposure, the stars already have sufficient motivation to have real presence in the show. At the same time, their status as big celebrities guarantees (at least for now) that they don't need to be 'pushed into the extremes' in order to attract the audience. *Running Man* is largely comprised of a variety of game-like challenges that are athletic or hide-and-seek in kind (De Kloet and Fung, 2017: 97). A large number of games such as ripping name-tags²¹, finding clues from hidden notes, mind quizzes, and doing sporting activities on foot massage shiatsu sheets are used as challenges or missions for celebrities to undertake. Stars are often put into different groups, and each member of the winning team is rewarded with a prize (whose monetary value normally ranges from a few hundred to several thousand yuan). No one from the losing team is permanently evicted from the show, although they might be temporarily eliminated in certain parts of one episode. In order to enhance the dramatic effect, scriptwriters also create a fictional theme for each episode that endows games and challenges with background stories, specific roles and plot-lines.

The second episode of season one, for example, was based on the theme 'searching for lovers from the past life' (寻找前世的恋人). Ten participants

²¹ Ripping name-tags involves players who protect their own name-tags (which are stick to the back) while trying to eliminate others by ripping name tags.

(seven MCs and three guest stars) are divided into five 'couples', and they need to compete in a series of missions to obtain clues and objects that help to reveal whether they were 'lovers' which is pre-decided by the producers. The winning team are awarded a pair of 'wedding rings' as a token of their fictional relationship. The sixth episode of season one is themed as 'escape from Xiushan Island'. Ten celebrities are assigned into two camps and sent to a small island located in Zhejiang Province which (according to the fictional plot-line) is about to be submerged. Through playing game-like challenges, they compete with each other in order to become the surviving team.

Apart from entertaining challenges, the depiction of the 'everyday lives' of celebrities when they participated in the show was another major component of the content production. Multiple cameras were installed in the vehicles they take, the restaurants they dine in and the bedrooms they sleep in order to collect material. Celebrities' private lives and 'worldly images' apparently attract a large audience. Scenes such as stars appearing on camera without wearing makeup, snoring when asleep and even accidentally breaking wind can soon become trendy topics on the Internet and instantly bump up their followers on personal blogs.

Giving overwhelming emphasis to celebrities, *Running Man* downplays the portrayal of ordinary people. According to a production manager of the show who participated in the production of the 2015 and 2016 seasons, he and his colleagues tend to deliberately avoid featuring common people for both economic and political reasons. Firstly, the programme is designed for celebrities rather than for 'ordinary' people as such. The manager expressed the view that "if we replace the stars with people who are not famous, and

everything else remains unchanged, we won't achieve ratings at all" (interview with a production manager, Zhejiang Satellite Television, 2017).

Partly for the purposes of preventing ordinary people from distracting viewers' attention, affecting the celebrities' activities, and even creating security problems (sometimes a scene being shot can be surrounded by tens of thousands of fans), ZJST often spends a considerable amount of money on building large and glamorous artificial sets (both indoor and outdoor). Even on occasions when selected fans are allowed to enter these sites, they are usually in cordoned off areas. When the production team choose existent revenues for shooting, public spaces such as museums, shopping malls, indoor stadiums, streets and tourist attractions are often temporarily closed down just for the programme.

Secondly, as an entertainment show, the producers try to avoid touching people's real lives and living environments so they will not accidentally broadcast any content that reveals the negative side of Chinese society. Confining the depiction of the masses to happy crowds and enthusiastic fans, on the other hand, is a politically safe method that also helps promote the programme (interview with a production manager, Zhejiang Satellite Television, 2017). It is worth mentioning that with central Government's consistent requirement for entertainment programmes to feature the masses as protagonists since 2015 (see Section 6, below), *Running Man* slightly enhanced the participation of ordinary people in its second and third seasons (broadcast in 2015 and 2016). However, the frequency of non-celebrities' appearance in the show remained low and when they did appear, they often played such 'insignificant roles' as crowds that cheer for their favourite idols, or commodity sellers, pedestrians, passengers, etc., that communicate with stars in order to

help them finish tasks. According to De Kloet and Fung (2017: 98), during the first three seasons of the show, only 16.7% of the total episodes featured interactions between stars and ordinary people.

6.5.2 Unable to survive without stars – the current situation of China's Reality shows

Running Man greatly contributes to the enhancement of its participating celebrities' popularity among Chinese people. Immediately after the programme's debut, the seven MCs soon became the hottest names on the Internet. Their followers on Xinlang Weibo soared during the three months when the programme was on the air, sometimes by hundreds of thousands overnight after the broadcast of one episode. Topics concerning them frequently became the most sought after and discussed information online (as indicated by Hot Topic and Hot Search²², and Angelababy (one of the MCs) remained the most searched celebrity in China for over two months (Xinhua. net, 2015b). Unsurprisingly, the seven stars soon became some of the favourite choices for investors in China's cultural industries. Their brand endorsement prices proliferated and those that were not famous enough for the big screen before the show (such as Chen He, Zheng Kai and Li Chen) began to play leading roles in various films. By the second season when the MCs returned, their average price nearly doubled as compared with the first season (interview with a production manager, Zhejiang Satellite Television, 2017).

After the success of *Where Are You Going Dad?* and *Running Man*, Reality TV shows that focus on celebrities proliferated and became prevalent on China's television screens. They, along with talent shows that either feature 'ordinary

²² Hot Topic and Hot Search are features of Sina Weibo which provides real-time updated lists indicating current affairs and persons that are most widely discussed and searched for by users.

people plus star judges/coaches' or 'professional singers' exclusively (see Section 5, above) have been the most dominant types of entertainment shows produced in China in recent years. In 2015, there were nearly 200 RTVs being broadcast by satellite channels (Peng, 2016). Among them the vast majority were celebrity Reality shows and singing contests (Xie and Xie, 2016). In 2016, over 90% of Reality shows produced by satellite channels were participated in by celebrities (Yan and Kao, 2016: 115). Out of the 20 most watched television variety shows broadcast in the same year, 13 were game/challenge shows that were almost exclusively staffed by celebrities and 6 were singing competitions (CVSC Sofres Media, 2017a). In 2017, celebrity games/challenges and singing contests once again took the positions of 13 and 6 out of the 20 entertainment programmes with the highest ratings, although the exact programmes that made the list changed significantly compared with the year before (CVSC Sofres Media, 2017b). In both 2016 and 2017, the only top 20 show that did not belong to these two categories was *The Brain (Zuiqiang Danao)*, a scientific talent show produced by Jiangsu Satellite TV in search of people with exceptional brain power. Even this programme, however, chooses to invite big celebrities from the entertainment industry as judges (occasionally also as contestants) in order to achieve high ratings.

With the prevalence of programmes that feature stars and ordinary people who aspire to become stars, China's Reality shows have become the key manufacturer of and promotional platform for actors and singers. In spite of their mass production, however, celebrities remain a 'scarce resource' when being constantly sought by dozens of satellite channels and hundreds of programmes. The current price for inviting a celebrity to appear on a Reality show is, according to a programme producer, "ridiculously high" (interview with a senior programme producer, Zhejiang Satellite Television, 2017). 'First tier' stars in

China on average earn more than RMB 30 million yuan (US\$ 4.72 million) for one season's production that usually lasts for 24 to 30 days. For the very top celebrities like Fan Bingbing and Xuzheng, participating in a Reality show can easily generate 70 to 80 million yuan in less than a month (Li, 2017c). Apart from professional artists, other main participants of Reality TV programmes (particularly singing competitions among professional singers and celebrity game/challenge shows) are those 'popular contestants' of mass-selection talent shows. It is common for them to earn millions after one season of shooting (interview with a production manager, Zhejiang Satellite Television, 2017). For celebrities, playing games and undertaking game-like missions offer them a much easier and faster way to earn money and enhance fame than playing roles in TV dramas/films or producing albums. For media practitioners, a widely shared view is that it is now extremely difficult to make a commercially profitable television Reality show without the participation of stars (Wang, 2016a).

6.6 Ideological frustrations engendered by contemporary Reality shows and the Government's responses

Today's entertainment programmes in China, with their focus on portraying stars and searching for commercially viable talent from ordinary people (particularly their ability to sing and perform on stage), take a safe strategy ideologically by refraining from touching existent social/political issues or lives. Spending enormous budgets on inviting well-known celebrities, building glamorous sites, purchasing cutting-edge equipment and hiring professional teams, satellite channels focus on the creation of extraordinary media spectacles that are profitable in the marketplace. The predominance of entertainment programmes in China's television sector, of course, 'benefits' the Party-State ideologically because by offering joy, satisfactions and pop idols, entertainment shows shift public attention away from social and political

problems. At the same time, however, the fact that the nation's television screens are now swarming with programmes that shun social reality and concentrate on the production and consumption of celebrities creates cultural effects that are by no means 'ideologically harmless'. The problem at stake is that the Party's 'propaganda machines' seem to be abandoning the 'mass-line' by focusing on the creation and depiction of 'cultural icons' who can hardly represent ordinary people yet are likely to have powerful cultural impact on the masses.

As I have explained in Chapter Three, the CPC's construction of socialist culture in the reform era has been focusing on the mass-line, positive propaganda, morality and patriotism. 'Excessive exposure' of the 'negative' aspects of the political system, society and people's lives as well as the promotion and dissemination of 'immoral' values and lifestyles are opposed by the propaganda system.

Today's Reality television shows, however, have a strong tendency towards the depiction of exclusive categories of people (i.e., celebrities and celebrity 'wannabes') in highly constructed 'realities'. In China's satellite channels' attempts to keep their content production 'depoliticised' and 'desocialised' in order to generate quick economic benefits and avoid political censorship, they simultaneously render their programmes 'incompetent' in contributing to the mass-line of culture. As the nation's most influential television entities with high administrative status, however, their attempt to remain ideologically 'neutral' is not something that can be tolerated for long by central Government.

When the television sector gives overwhelming emphasis to the depiction of stars in the showbiz world, they are also promoting public figures with values,

identities and lifestyles that are incompatible with the socialist culture the CPC aims to construct. Contemporary celebrities in China, just like singers and actors from other nations, are intrinsically and most visibly connected with such cultural and personal traits as individual fame, wealth and beauty. When China's television sector is dominated by rich and famous and people who are physically attractive, and when such types of individuals can easily earn huge amounts of money and wild popularity through performing on stage, playing games and 'living lives' in front of the camera, the core values and lifestyles this industry tends to valorise and purports to realise are self-evident.

For central Government, however, cultural products that promote individual pursuits for money, fame and pleasure are deemed as salient negative effects brought by the commercialisation and westernisation of the cultural sector. Once these values and lifestyles become prevalent in society and are widely internalised by ordinary people as guiding pursuits in life, Chinese traditional morality and the Party's revolutionary culture are likely to be undermined, and people might lose genuine faith in, sense of responsibility for, and devotions to collective entities and causes like the Party, the society and the construction of socialism.

The incompatibility between contemporary celebrity culture and Government ideological project is also saliently reflected in the former's poor moral status. Reality television shows produced by provincial satellite channels have already become the most important platform for the creation of pop stars. When the mass production of stars is institutionalised and widely practised by television stations, and when celebrities are selected in ways that are largely detached from social reality, those who have obtained wealth and fame (many in an overnight fashion) by demonstrating their 'star qualities' (such as singing, dancing

and beautiful faces) are easily tempted to choose 'decadent' lifestyles. The gossip and scandal about stars, in turn, are eagerly searched for, probed into and hyped up by media practitioners and netizens in order to satisfy people's voyeuristic desires. In recent years, negative news concerning celebrities' private lives has become increasingly prevalent in China's media sector, and incidents such as extramarital affairs, prostitution, drug-taking and drunk driving frequently occupy the headlines of newspapers, television news, websites and microblog hot-topics.

Since 2015, central Government has put forward a series of documents in order to regulate entertainment programmes, and Reality shows' concentration on celebrities and ignorance of the masses has been the primary focus of official regulations. In June 2015, the SAPPRFT issued *A Notice on Strengthening the Management of Reality Shows* (Document 154) and stipulated the rectification of future programmes both in terms of the nature of participants and cultural orientation. Document 154 stipulated that television stations should "abandon the wrong notion of 'using celebrities to obtain ratings' and correct the tendency to depend only on stars" (SAPPRFT, 2015, paragraph, 5). It requires future programmes to enhance the proportion of ordinary people's participation, 'actively reflect the great progress of China's reform and opening-up, people's creation and effort', and 'guide the masses to correctly understand social problems and livelihood hardships' (paragraph, 3). The document also criticised Reality shows' inclination towards 'over-entertainment and vulgarisation' (paragraph 1), and particularly their tendency to promote luxurious lifestyles, immoral values and wrong ethical standards. It urges television stations to play 'guiding' moral and cultural roles by incorporating socialist core values and Chinese traditional culture into Reality shows.

One month later, the SAPPRFT summoned over 120 media practitioners (which mainly consisted of chief producers and programme directors from provincial satellite channels) to a 'training session of Reality shows' held in Beijing. Tian Jin, the Deputy Director of SAPPRFT, presided over the session and instructed media practitioners to give particular emphasis to the 'mass-line' in the production of future programmes. According to him, a Reality show has 'significant value and meaning' because it can be 'an effective channel to cultivate and disseminate socialist core values' and 'an important carrier to tell good Chinese stories and showcase contemporary China's image' (Tian, 2015, paragraph 12). Television practitioners, however, need to adhere to the portrayal of ordinary people and social reality in order to fully realise the values of this type of television programme. As he said:

“Reality television is a positive innovation in promoting television's ability to 'go into the thick of life and take root among the masses' (深入生活，扎根人民). Compared with other types of programmes, Reality shows break the constraints of studios and stages by setting their recording scenes in actual social environments such as the farming field, community college and military camps. They create good conditions for programme production in reflecting the everyday lives of ordinary people and invite the masses to participate. They are beneficial for radio and television in reflecting the objective reality of social lives, and beneficial for the extension of radio and television's depiction of the breadth and width of social lives.” (ibid, 2015, paragraph 14)

For central Government, the production of 'ideal' Reality shows that contribute

to socialist culture requires television practitioners to rid themselves of imitating existing models from 'capitalist nations'. According to a programme manager, during the aforementioned training session, dominant global models were criticised because of their 'fundamental pitfalls'. For central propaganda officials, Western Reality shows usually depend on a large amount of monetary rewards to stimulate competitions among contestants, and often have the propensity to promote and exhibit the negative aspects of human nature, power struggles and office politics. Korean shows tend to concentrate on stars while ignoring the participation and exhibition of ordinary people. Focusing on the provision of pleasure and the fulfilment of people's voyeuristic desires for celebrities, they tend to sideline social responsibility and cultural values. Because contemporary Reality shows in China are mostly based on Korean formats, officials from SAPPRFT require satellite channels to focus on the depiction of ordinary people in actual social environments and stop focusing on famous celebrities. Due to the fact that celebrities have already become the major appeal without which most Reality shows cannot survive economically, a 'transitional period' is provided and satellite channels are allowed to continue to include stars as participants. However, it is required that celebrities should be 'downgraded' to subsidiary roles in order to highlight ordinary people's cultures and lives, particularly those that are 'positive', 'moral' and 'patriotic' (interview with a programme manager, Zhejiang Satellite Television, 2017).

Under the institutional and censorship arrangements of China's television sector, however, to produce a commercially profitable Reality show that solely or primarily features ordinary people is difficult, and it is even more so when ordinary lives are to be portrayed as something embedded in social and political reality. As Chapter Five demonstrates, even for news workers from local stations, 'everyday' works are strongly and frequently constrained by both

central censorship and interventions from local powers. For producers of entertainment programmes who are not even officially permitted to cover social and political affairs (because non-state-owned capital is frequently involved in the production process), any 'excessive' depictions of the 'negative' aspects of people's lives or the 'dark side' of society can bring devastating consequences. As a senior producer who has been working on various Reality show projects for nearly ten years remarked:

“Yes, the Bureau demand us to discard big stages and stop chasing celebrities. They say we can't let the masses to play supporting roles or be the backgrounds. The masses should play the primary roles... But the truth is, the viewers want to see stars. If ordinary people become the protagonists, what is there to see? Unless someone is freakish (奇葩) to a great extent. It is indeed not erroneous if you say that Reality shows are displaying wealth and pursuing stars. But we need a selling point, and famous celebrities are naturally our primary choice. You need to invite stars – big stars. And big pay cheques are necessary...” (interview with a senior programme producer, Beijing Enlight Media, 2017)

According to a programme director from Zhejiang Satellite TV, to produce a Reality show that focuses on ordinary people's lives is much more difficult than making one that features celebrities. As a programme producer said:

“The biggest challenge for making a Reality show that features average people (素人节目) is to tell attractive stories. We have to use external factors to push people to the extremes, [such as] environments and rules. We have to stimulate them so they can become exaggerated selves... Stars are

different. They have their own ring of light and attract audience very naturally. There are hundreds of Reality show production teams in China, but I have heard of very few that specialise in *suren*²³ shows... (interview with Liu Chang, Hunan Satellite Television, 2017).

In China's cultural sector where the propaganda system exerts paramount and ubiquitous control, it is difficult to see that its official ideological requirement would fail to yield instant and large-scale changes in the practice of cultural workers. Central Government's demand in 2015 for Reality shows to shift their focus from celebrities to ordinary people, however, did not yield immediate results. In the following two years after the release of document 154 and the holding of the training session, Reality shows that feature celebrities as protagonists continued to dominate China's television screens, and they took up the majority of the nation's top-rated programmes (see Section 5, above). Because of the lack of effectiveness of its policies, SAPPRFT have been continuing to strengthen its regulations. In June 2016, it put forward *A Notice on Vigorously Promoting the Independent Innovation of Television Programmes* (SAPPRFT, 2016). This document stipulates that each satellite channel could broadcast at most two programmes that are based on imported copyright or on co-productions with foreign entities during the prime hours (17:30-22:30) every year. To air a Reality show that is based on a foreign format, a satellite channel should gain approval from central SAPPRFT and be filed with local regulators at least two months in advance. The document urges the television industry to develop original domestic programmes that 'carry the Chinese dream, socialist core values, patriotism, Chinese traditional culture' and 'convey good Chinese stories and promote China's spirit' (paragraph 2).

²³ 'Suren' refers to ordinary people.

In August 2017, SAPPRFT issued *A Notice on Developing Satellite Channels into Communication Platforms with Guidance and Culture*, which raised a series of requirements for satellite channels. The reduction of Reality shows' dependency on celebrities is a major focus of the document. It is demanded that the television industry should 'firmly resist chasing and hyping-up stars, and exercise strict control over the broadcasting time and quantity of Reality shows participated in by celebrities' (SAPPRFT, 2017, paragraph 6). Satellite channels are required to 'put the people-centred working orientation into practice, make great efforts to enhance ordinary people's participation in programmes, and make masses from the grassroots guests and protagonists' (paragraph 8). The document further elevated central Government's restriction on overseas formats and asserts that 'in principle, no programmes based on imported foreign formats will be broadcast in the prime hours' (paragraph 7). In order to make sure that its policies are effectively implemented, SAPPRFT urges relevant governmental institutions and entities to closely monitor television programmes and report their implementation of this document to the central propaganda system.

It is too early to tell when (or whether) China's television sector will be extricated from its dependency on celebrities as by the time my fieldwork was completed (in late 2017), Reality shows remained the dominant form of TV programme and those featuring celebrities are still widely produced by satellite channels. However, the influence of central Government regulating measures is evident and it is becoming increasingly difficult for television practitioners to simply concentrate on stars while ignoring ordinary people.

Two commercial investment conferences²⁴ – held between September and October 2017 by the Zhejiang and Hunan satellite channels – discussed future programme arrangements largely for the benefit of potential sponsors and advertisers. Judging from their plans for Reality shows in 2018, first, new seasons of previously popular shows such as *Running Man*, *The Voice of China*, *Trump Card*²⁵ will continue to be produced and are still highlighted (during the conferences) by all three channels as their flagship programmes. Ordinary people's participation will be enhanced in celebrity game and challenge shows, but celebrities will remain their primary protagonists. In order to meet central Government's constriction of imported formats (particularly those from South Korea), these news seasons will no longer be co-productions with foreign entities and their Chinese names have been changed in order to sever any 'non-Chinese' origins.

Secondly, a number of 'cultural Reality shows' (文化真人秀) will be broadcast by these channels in 2018. Zhejiang Satellite TV, for example, was designing a quiz show named Up! Poetry (Xiangshangba Shici), which tests ordinary people's knowledge of traditional Chinese culture (particular poems) through entertaining forms of competition. According to a deputy manager of Zhejiang Television Station, the production of this programme is largely due to 'policy reasons' (政策的原因), and it is uncertain if such 'niche programming' (小众的节目) will survive for more than one season. Jiangsu Satellite TV chooses to combine celebrities with literature and plans a programme that invites famous actors to read poetry (interview with a deputy manager, Zhejiang Provincial

²⁴ The attendance at these conferences are part of the empirical research for this thesis.

²⁵ *Trump Card* (*Wangpai dui Wangpai*) is an indoor game show aired on ZJST which features celebrities who showcase talents and undertaking light challenges.

Television, 2017). Thirdly, because of the strict constrictions enforced by central Government on celebrity Reality shows, there is a strong tendency for talent shows to once again become the dominant type of Reality show produced by satellite channels. Apart from singing competitions, another type of programme that is gaining widespread attention is idol cultivation shows (偶像养成类节目) – an RTV format that has become famous in South Korea in recent years. It focuses on the formation of girl groups and boy bands, and especially the training, competing, eliminating processes. According to the same deputy manager, idol cultivation shows are very likely to become the next ‘phenomenal programme’ in China, and nearly all major satellite channels plan to launch similar projects. Due to central Government policies that restrict television stations from introducing overseas programmes, however, it is online audio-visual providers rather than television stations that stand a better chance of providing high-quality programmes through purchasing overseas formats or engaging in co-productions.

Conclusion

In sharp contrast to the decline of Minsheng programme examined by the last Chapter, entertainment shows have been the most popular and profitable type of television programming produced in China since the mid-2000s. The provincial satellite channels' synchronous 'devotion' to the generation of entertainment is nothing coincidental. Instead, it has been a commonly practiced strategy in order to avoid presentations of social/political realities and to fully incorporate 'non-stated-owned' investment in capital accumulation. My examination of the 'mega formats' and 'phenomenon shows' of reality television demonstrates that China's television has a strong tendency to centre on pop stars and 'celebrity wannabes', and on the promotion of commercial idols'

values, identities, and lifestyles.

The dominance of entertainment stars and typical commercial values (such as fame, wealth, pleasure, and stardom) over China's television screens poses direct threats to the Party's ideological project. Central Government have taken a series of measures which aim at transforming reality television. Celebrity game/challenge shows and singing contests have been the focus of government regulations since the mid-2000s. For the ruling elites, it is imperative for reality shows to abandon their current dependency on celebrities and stop eluding the depiction of the masses. To make 'ideal' reality shows, satellite channels should feature ordinary people's lives and their actual living environments, and give particular emphases to the positive aspects of people's activities and China's achievements. Television practitioners, however, face severe economic and political barriers when attempting to shift focus from 'extraordinary' entertainment stars to ordinary citizens.

Chapter Seven:

Conclusion

The most general framework of reference for this thesis is the United Nation's sustainable development framework, which has challenged the Western-centric narratives of national development-through-industrial modernity. UNESCO, for the last two decades, has attempted to define ways in which cultural policies can be used to facilitate industrial development while maintaining the priority on Human Development (individual capabilities) in relation to place-based cultural sustainability. As stated in Chapter Two (Section 2), China broadly concurs with the UN sustainable development framework insofar as 'culture' is positioned as 'key' to national economic sustainability (hence the Hangzhou Declaration of 2013). Moreover, UNESCO's ethical priority in the protection and promotion of 'cultural diversity' (hence the 2005 Convention) has been an ideological axiom in China since the 1990s (see Chapter Two, Section 3).

The central rationale of this thesis is that for the Chinese Central government, culture has always played an essential role in the party, in ideology, and in its strategic approach to national development. Chapter Two established the premise of the thesis: that cultural policy in contemporary China should be understood historically, as a complex mechanism of political reproduction internal to the very definition of a socialist society. Moreover, culture was a central dimension to the ideological project that maintains CPC leadership, consolidates the legitimacy of that leadership through a robust and efficacious planning of national economic development, and, of course, with an explicit reference to socialist values enfranchises 'the people' by articulating their essential interests and so stimulating their loyalties. Chapter Three then opens the critical-historical analysis, by constructing an historical narrative, of the

formation of the Chinese Government's management of culture, which entails a perpetual series of ideological demands for cultural industries and practitioners and their role in national development.

Chapter Three therefore identifies the socio-political nexus of 'culture' and 'the people' as vital for the political credibility, legitimacy, stability and sustainability of the historical communist project in China. For policymakers, the 'mass-line' of culture serves as the foundation of China's cultural policy framework for three primary reasons: firstly, it integrates the party's official ideology with the socio-political consciousness of ordinary people; secondly (since post-Mao era reformation) the CPC's ever-urgent task of ideological reformation requires the enfranchisement of everyday 'culture' (widely-shared values, aspirations and recognised moral codes) as the major source of ideological replenishment; and thirdly, 'mass-culture' as policy approach plays a primary role in forming values, ethical standards, norms and identities that maintain social order. Even in economic policy, the culture and everyday cultural practices of the people are a factor recognised by national leaders as crucial in China's construction of a socialist economy.

Despite their different conceptual and empirical foundations (UNESCO's framework is deeply informed by Western democratic principles, post-war decolonisation movements, and more lately, a critical view of free market capitalism — whereas China's cultural policy is shaped by historical materialism, the mass line, and economic decentralisation), both parties share the recognition that cultural diversity is central to the socio-economic developmental process. Historical materialism holds the view that the people (the undifferentiated masses — not heroes, geniuses or social elites) are the creators of history, and the central agents of social progress from capitalism to

socialism. The mass-line, a key principle of the CPC's revolutionary theory that is based upon historical materialism, stipulates the necessity of harnessing people's values, ideas and activities as the foundation of socialist construction, and constructing the vanguard Party as the embodiment of 'advanced' culture and social practice. The centrality of ordinary people in the economic and ideological construction of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', as Chapter Two and Three have explained, serves as a guiding principle of China's cultural policy.

China's national development, as examined by Chapter Three, has not been based upon a predetermined economic model that established a stable set of formal institutional arrangements that regulates the people's activities. rather, it has been characterised by constant reform, each of which have emphasised experiment, innovation, flexibility and step-by-step transition from a planned economy to a market-oriented economy. The Communist Party's pragmatic and experimental attitude towards national development greatly contributes to the economic achievements of a nation that is weak in most measures of its formal institutions (Blasek, 2015: 78; Wang, 2013; Xu, 2011: 4; Ruan, 2016: 52). It is now widely observed that China's economic reforms were not primarily driven by top-down laws or regulations (Clark, Murrell and Whiting, 2008: 420), but by endogenous practices initiated at the ground level that are deeply informed by local values, rituals, customs and norms (Tsai, 2007; Xu, 2011; Nee and Oppen, 2012; Herrmann-Pillath, 2015; Schütz, 2016). Local Party leaders and government officials, whose political careers and personal interests in China's reform era have been largely dependent on the economic performance of their jurisdictions, have been frequently involved in local development and use their political power, expansive connections, and valuable resources to implement innovative ideas derived from local wisdom,

coordinate and assist local enterprises and entrepreneurs, disseminate 'successful' practices and institutional arrangements across regions (Xu, 2006; 2011; Zheng, 2007; Ong, 2012; He & Zhu, 2019, pp. 7-8). The most significant breakthroughs of China's official policies at the elite level, such as the legal permission of private businesses, are frequently Central Government's recognition and refinement of already widespread 'informal' institutional arrangements (Chen, 2007). Over time, there emerged numerable regional 'modes' across China whose development statuses vary significantly from each other and are deeply embedded in local cultures and people's ways of lives (Keith, Lash, Arnoldi and Rooker, 2013: 118; Chen, 2016: 70).

Therefore, China's national development, to some extent at least, must be perceived as a validation of UNESCO's notion of culture as an 'enabler' of development. The Chinese government gives much leeway to the organic formation of institutional arrangements that are deeply embedded in local realities and people's cultures (Chan, Xu & Gao, 2015); for it constructs its national institutions largely based on already widespread and workable economic arrangements (Keith, Lash, Arnoldi and Rooker, 2013: 117).

However, the overwhelming emphasis on economic growth both of Central and local government, has not only transformed China from one of the most economically equalitarian country in the world to perhaps the most unequal (certainly in Asia), it has also generated huge environmental and social problems. Indeed, as noted by Wei (2007) and Saich (2015, p. 2), the behaviour of local government officials greatly impact the development of regional economies, and are routinely characterised in terms of 'predatory', 'entrepreneurial', and 'clientelist'. Beneath the facade of a highly unified, centralised, 'command economy' nation-state, is a diversity of political

factions, allegiances and economic self-interest. While local culture and the cultural productivity of ordinary people have played a central role in both regional and national development efforts, this by no means indicate that this will be recognised and valued. Powerful local leaders and the panoply of economic enterprises over which they wield power, tend only to instrumentalise the benefits of economic growth through culture; there is no evidence or indication to suggest that their concerns tend towards fulfilling the needs, values and aspirations of local people (So, 2007; Wei, 2007: 26). The many cultural spheres and dimensions of China's cultural sector certainly has many potential roles to play – not in providing a medium for Central government, but in articulating and providing the means of expression for people's culture (as beliefs, values and aspirations), and also in generating representations of the socio-economic conditions of a sustainable cultural life (in the face of the increasing predatory behaviours of political vested interests, corporate exploitation, environmental degradation and widening income inequality).

China's Central government recognises that the protection and promotion of everyday life through cultural policies is crucial in supporting national development, and also in forming a vibrant socialist culture that buttresses the Communist Party's ideological construction. This thesis' examination of the Government-controlled institutional reform of the cultural system (Chapter Four), and the developmental trajectory of China's TV industry as a primary field of cultural production (Chapter Five and Six) reveal that Central government is caught in a perpetual state of crisis. Such crisis lies in the structural contradictions animating the Government's management of culture, and the increasing division between the culture of everyday life, and the politically controlled commercialisation of cultural production.

Thus far, this thesis has constructed an historical study of China's cultural system reform, which has been the prolonged process of maintaining the Party's leadership over the entire cultural sphere and also enhancing the market competitiveness of China's cultural industries (particularly state-owned enterprises). Under Central government ideological and institutional management, the TV industry demonstrates a systematic detachment from the mass line in content production. The Minsheng programme – the most widely produced genre of television news by local territorial channels since the mid-2000s, has been unable to achieve its original aims to provide an accurate and truthful portrayal of people culture and ways of life.

Constrained by Central government emphasis on positive propaganda and stringent political control enforced by local propaganda apparatus, television practitioners are forced to dwell on the 'trivial' and 'vulgar' aspects of ordinary existence in order to entertain the audience and survive in the marketplace. Reality shows broadcast by provincial satellite channels, since the mid-2000s, have been the most popular and profitable type of television programming. China's Reality television has a strong propensity to centre on 'celebrities' and 'celebrity wannabes', and on the aggrandizement of commercial idols' values, identities, and lifestyles. This thesis has asserted that despite the Central government's policies which consistently aim at containing excessive entertainment and vulgarity, enhancing programmes' commitment to the 'mass line' of culture, 'ordinary people' and their living reality remain marginalised. Under the government's management of culture, which is characterised by top-down censorship and regulation, China's television industry has failed to protect or promote the values, ideas and social practice of the masses which are considered by policymakers as necessary for both national development

and ideological formation.

From this extensive critical-historical study of the dilemma of China's cultural-political economy, an argument emerges: Central government's management of culture has both 'positioned' cultural policy as internal to political economy (and by implication, allowing culture, even the relatively a-political fine arts, play a full role in national development). Yet, in giving culture that role, culture has become the arena in which the contradiction of Government policy — the crisis of its communist aspirations — is manifest to a marked extent. For, as all cultural policies maintained, a communist government requires a fully socialist culture in which to assume legitimacy and deliver effective government. But, as this thesis has demonstrated, the Government's politicisation of culture through its institutionalisation of socialist culture within mechanisms of restriction and repression, has manifest a distinct tendency to 'isolate itself from the masses' (脱离群众); and this has been repeatedly indicated even by central Party leaders as one of the most critical pitfalls of China's cultural sector (people.cn: 2014; Zhou & Li, 2015; Xi, 2019).

No systematic cultural policy reforms have taken place to stem the increasing intensity of this contradiction. The government requires 'the people', not simply to be obedient citizens but to be citizens of a successful communist country — cultural citizens who express the success of an historic, revolutionary, political regime. The very criteria of political legitimacy, set forth by the revolutionary regime, is embedded in culture and the life of the people: the people are the true expression of communist society. Therefore, an accurate and truthful portrayal of the cultural life of the people is stipulated by the mass-line doctrine, a fundamental principle of China's cultural policy, and a fundamental expression of historical materialism.

In order to fulfil both national imperatives (of economic growth, sustainable development, and effective communist governance outside of Beijing) and international imperatives (its dominance in regional markets, its strong role in the global economy, and its credibility in global political spheres, like the UN) the validity and attractiveness of China's socialist path remains to a significant extent with its people, and Chinese society. In this regard, Central government needs to demonstrate both strength and stability. In ideological terms, strength and stability demand that any form of change must be an historically defensible progression (or development from the laws of historical materialism and institutional evolution of the communist revolution). This entails a balance of between a strong and enforced political ideology and concomitant network of public policy institutions, and the people (their lives, culture and the fast changing complex of Chinese society).

In the absence of historical and empirically in-depth studies on how public policy emerges and evolves in China, one observation serves as a necessary point of reference. Policy making in China, in accordance with the philosophical character of historical materialism, repudiates radical transformations of shifts in paradigm and priorities, over gradual progression. Central government in China, expresses, in both theory and practice, a tendency to the local experiment, incremental adjustment, and solution-based policy change, in accordance with its ideologically-justified long-term policy aims. The ideological pragmatism of China's cultural policy, and its internal role to national political economy, makes specific policy recommendations difficult for scholars (Lee, 2000; Huang, 2007).

Nonetheless, the critical-historical analysis of this thesis, where the post-

revolutionary history of cultural policy in China has manifest its crucial role in national development, can only but propose changes. The policy 'contradiction' identified in this thesis, and the consequent crisis it diagnoses, is not a *fait accompli* and not an inevitable product of what Western critics might refer to as an authoritarian communism. Of course, it would be an act of political idealism to propose structural or fundamental ideological shifts in a communist country (and, it must be said, a highly successful communist country). Rather, guidelines or general measures will be extrapolated from the thesis' empirical research, and which are supplemented by knowledge gained by sustained discussions with interviewees and cultural practitioners in China, who are subject to Central government strictures and diktat. While a critical-historical analysis of existing policies, institutions and practices, needs to maintain a macro-economic overview of policy change (along with a broad ideological framework on the rationales, values and strategic level of the political management of Chinese society), the recommendations articulated below are based on empirical findings and are more specific.

Empirical findings, of course, cannot escape ideology or the communist aspirations of Central government. The concluding recommendations of this thesis therefore will not be made on the assumption (discussed in Chapter Two) that China might become increasingly influenced by the Liberal Democracy of the West, but rather, they are made on the assumption that the communist regime will continue, and that any subsequent influence by, or demands for, democracy, will only generate incremental changes (i.e. not detrimentally challenge CPS supremacy or ideological transformation). Yet the concluding recommendations do indeed serve to articulate a critical consciousness of the contradiction and crisis of the communist regime, but put forth practical proposals that would mitigate against an increase in political

crisis. Central government can and must allow an authentic socialist culture to evolve and a culture of the people to develop: this is, above all, necessary for the mass-line principle in China's cultural sector to be fulfilled.

First, we must remark upon the most salient fact, identified in all the research interviews, that Central Government censorship is prohibitive of cultural production at every level — research, design, programme creation, broadcast, and reception. Censorship operates with preconceived notions of critical and 'negative' portrayals of China's social and political reality, and hinders cultural workers in their honest depictions of contemporary social reality. This prevents an interrogation of the marginalisation of ordinary citizens' interests by political and economic forces, and the reasons for this.

Second, Central party leaders need to cognise the relation between their political aspirations and how the cultural and media industries are dominated by local political agents and their intricate interest groups (The presence of vested interests, as Chapter 5 explains, imposes significant influence on the production of local news and documentaries). Both Scholars and media practitioners (and even members of the People's Congress), have been long arguing for the necessity of introducing formal regulations in China, serving to safeguard ordinary citizens' and cultural workers' rights when facing overbearing political power (Sun, 2004: 21-29). During the fieldwork undertaken for this thesis, forceful complaints were heard from cultural practitioners concerning the lack of legal protection for journalism, reporting and related media activities. A news professional's access to legislative protection takes form only in the regulation on the Disclosure of Government Information, which was promulgated by the State Council in 2008 with the purpose of enhancing government public accountability. In practice, this

regulation is rarely helpful to news workers when acquiring sensitive information, articulating views, or asserting rights.

In practical terms, the basis for a sufficient legislative system of protection, already exists: the 'Press Law' was put on the state's legislative agenda in the 1980s but has been left pending ever since (Chin, 2016: 76). Formal laws and regulations established in the field of culture should similarly give priority to cultural workers' rights in expressions and communication in investigating and articulating contemporary social realities, otherwise the safeguarding and promoting citizen's ways of life or the culture of the people will not happen. The enforcement of law should be supplemented by Central Government documents concerning the importance of the creation of people-centred cultural works.

Third, placing people's interests, values and everyday life as the very basis of cultural policy entails that cultural units and practitioners be extricated from the intertwining dominance of political and economic directives. It is particularly the case for media outlets at the local level whose operations are deeply controlled by local governments and their pervasive *guanxi* ties; territorial television channels, non-party newspapers and other cultural units at the local level, many of which are already suffering from financial predicaments and political marginalisation, should be gradually separated institutionally from the party and governmental organizations and be reconstructed as public service media units.²⁶ For Central government's own need for an authentic people's culture,

²⁶ Nearly all the television practitioners from territorial channels interviewed for this thesis expressed the view that in order to implement the mass line, it is imperative that their news-related programmes operate independently from local political authorities. Many of the interviewees who current work for Mingsheng programmes, believed that news workers are indeed stimulated by ratings and advertising revenue when conducting investigative reports, and 'traditional' news and documentaries that truly focus on the general populace tend to achieve great financial popularity among the audience. However, they also believed that because local non-satellite channels are deeply trapped in difficulties such as low ratings and revenue, lack of

Media Production should be allowed a certain autonomy from the persistent political directives and diktat's that create a working culture of dependency.

The People's Congresses, at local levels, might serve as the sponsors of a restructured public service media. According to China's current constitution, the People's Congress is the supreme authority in the political system and the basic institutional arrangement that exercises power over government. In theory, it has the power to legislate and amend laws, elect key officials, supervise and oversee the operation of governments and courts (Li, 2017d: 1). However, in practice, in contrast to western parliaments (House of Commons in the UK; the House of Representatives in the US), the People's Congress has not fulfilled its powers, only 'rubber stamping' pre-formed CPC decisions (Saich, 2015: 3; Kuhn, 2009: 497). Currently, People's Congress representatives are elected by the public at county and rural levels, while deputies at higher levels are elected by lower-level representatives.

Placing local public cultural units under the jurisdiction of the People's Congresses, will sever the direct control of local political power over television and newspapers' production. Such an arrangement will enhance the People's Congresses' ability to fulfil their constitutionally enshrined rights — to supervise local authorities and safeguard people's interests against exploitative powers. For Central government, the independence of media from local governments' will significantly reduce the systemic and institutionalised marginalisation of the people as a presence and agency in media representation generally, and in turn, this will function as a practical policy arrangement against regional protectionism. Special committees could helpfully be established under

professional investigative journalists, and insufficient technical personnel (particularly people who specialise in promoting and delivering programme content on online audio-visual platforms), a transition towards public service media is indeed the best options for local territorial channels.

People's Congresses, which are responsible for the general management of media outlets, the maintenance of their public service nature, the enhancement of public media's social support and institutional environment. The operations of public service media should be independent of commercial sponsorship, and the governments at national and local levels should provide financial subsidies in the forms of tax exemption, fiscal appropriation, and/or the establishment of specialty funds. The everyday operation and content production of public service media should be primarily focused on the promotion and protection of local culture and history, the provision of truthful and balanced information concerning people's culture, everyday life and livelihood, the supervision of local governmental and social institutions. The central Government could easily promulgate laws that strictly protect media practitioners activities against the interferences of political and economic powers. Special party and government agencies need to be established at the central level in order to ensure local officials and media practitioners' commitment to laws and regulations. The current 'news monitoring groups' (mentioned in Chapter 3, Section 3) can be converted into public service committees that supplement central agencies' work.

The above recommendations or propositions are not, as stated, intended to 'democratise' or provide for structural change or a transformation for China's management of culture, but they form the political implications that follow from the empirical findings and central argument of this thesis. These implications are, of course, substantial but not overly-optimistic as they appeal to existing legal and ideological realities. China is simply not fulfilling the political aspirations it makes, and this is generated a crisis in communist society. These recommendations, moreover, have also served to reinforce the predominant observation underpinning the thesis' argument, that cultural policy in China

concerns the very central political mechanisms internal to the historical evolution of China's communist society.

Finally, a concluding comment is required on Central government's historically inherited political dominance over literature and arts (which is often identified as the source of its overwhelming emphasis on positive propaganda, and, conversely, the exigency for cultural production to survive on earned profits and not public funds). Yet political dominance is not an inevitable outcome of China's communist structure: Central government could, within existing arrangements, break the current structural limitations imposed by pan-regional political governance — and allow and encourage a greater breadth of inquiry, knowledge and social investigation for media specifically, but for all cultural practitioners. A major obstacle, of course, is that the Communist Party maintains a positivist understanding of 'reality', where anything not already measured and codified as positive and desirable is deemed undesirable and so subject to prohibition. New cultural expressions easily find themselves as threatening to the legitimacy, social and political stability, of China's matrix of powerful organisations and individuals, simply by not being recognised or understood. The 1989 political crisis in China, and the collapse of communist regimes around the world, have further aggravated political elites fear of chaos and loss of control in the cultural and ideological field.

This thesis has therefore argued that China's political domination of the cultural sphere has morphed into a truncation of its own policy aims, where culture was an essential dimension of a successful socialist society. The current ruling elites in China would, of course, not agree with this assessment, but currently communist China is faced with a people-centred national cultural policy being suppressed in favour of the continued and extraordinary aggrandisement of the

lives of the wealthy and the powerful. The challenge therefore remains, for China to cultivate a vibrant and diversified 'socialist culture' that sustains people's morality, customs and values within the aims of social and economic development.

At the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China held in October 2017, President Xi Jinping declared that Socialism with Chinese Characteristic had entered a 'new era' and a 'new historical juncture', and the primary contradiction facing Chinese society has become the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and people's ever-growing need for a better life. The fundamental task of the CPC, therefore, should be the fulfilment of 'people's aspirations to live a better life' (cited in Xi, 2017a). To a large extent, the implementation of the abovementioned reforms of the cultural system will depend on whether the party-state itself is willing to transform itself from a 'developmental regime' that single-mindedly pursues GDP growth to one that commits to the construction of a sustainable and people-centred socialist China.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interviewee table

Name	Job description	Date of Interview	Place of Interview
Li Xiang	Production Manager of <i>Zero Distance</i> (2001-2009)	14 June 2016/ 17 June 2016/ 8 November 2017	Nanjing
	The Vice-President of JPT' Media Centre (since 2012)		
	Senior News Editor of <i>Zero Distance</i>	20 June 2016	Nanjing
Tian Li	Senior Programme Producer of JPT	17 June 2016/ 10 November 2017	Nanjing
		19 June 2016	
	Journalist of JPT	19 June 2016	Nanjing
Li Na	Senior Programme Producer of Hubei Provincial TV	19 June 2017/ August 17 2016	Wuhan
		14 August 2016	
	Senior Programme Producer of Hubei Provincial TV	14 August 2016	Wuhan
	Vice Producer-in-Chief of <i>Zero Distance</i>	18 June 2016/ 11 November 2017	Nanjing Online (Wechat)
	Programme Producer of Hubei Provincial TV	August 16 2016	Wuhan

	Production manager of ZJST	January 8 2017	Hangzhou
	Programme producer of ZJST	January 12 2017	Hangzhou
	Deputy Manager of Zhejiang Television Station	January 12 2017	Hangzhou
	Senior Programme Producer from Hubei Provincial TV	February 23 2017	Wuhan
	Senior Producer of Beijing Enlight Media	February 16	Wuhan
	Programme Director of Zhejiang Satellite TV	January 14 2017	Hangzhou
Sun Zhigang	Senior Programme producer and Director of ZJST	January 16 2017/ September 1 2017	Hangzhou Online (Wechat)
	Senior Programme Director of HNST	February 27 2017/ February 30 2017	Changsha
	Deputy Director of the Advertising Department of HNST	February 27 2017/ August 21 2017	Changsha Wuhan
Liu Chang	Senior Programme producer of HNST	February 30 2017	Changsha

Appendix 2: Guiding interview questions (order of questions not determined before interview)

A production manager of ZJST

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *Running Man*.
- Please describe your routine work in the production process of the programme.
- What do you think are the major reasons behind *Running Man*'s success?
- What are the major difficulties that you encounter in the production process of the show?
- In the design and production process of the programme, do you use ordinary people's cultural life (老百姓的文化生活) as important source material?
- I notice that *Running Man* has recently transformed its style due to the government's demand for Reality shows to focus on ordinary people and social reality. Can you describe such transformation to me?

A programme producer of ZJST

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *Running Man*.
- Please describe your routine work in the production process of the programme.
- What do you think are the major reasons behind *Running Man*'s success?
- What are the major difficulties that you encounter in the production process of the show?
- What do you think are the key to a successful Reality show in China?
- In the design and production process of Reality shows, do you use ordinary people's cultural life as important source material?
- How do you respond to the comment that Reality shows tend to ignore ordinary people living reality?

A deputy manager of Zhejiang Television Station

- Please tell me about your job at Zhejiang Satellite TV.

- Please describe to me your routine work at the station.
- Why do you think Reality shows are so widely-produced in China?
- What do you think are the keys to a Reality show's success?
- At the commercial investment conference, you mentioned that Zhejiang Satellite TV will give more chance to ordinary people to participate in your programmes. Can you describe such change to me?
- Why do you think Reality shows in China did not give enough attention to ordinary people?

A senior programme director of Hubei Provincial Television

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *My Chinese Star*.
- Please describe your routine work in the production process of the programme.
- What are the major difficulties that you encounter in the production process of the show?
- In the design and production process of the programme, do you use ordinary people's cultural life as important source material?
- What do you think are the keys to a Reality show's success?
- How do you respond to the comment that Reality shows in China's give too much attention to celebrities while ignoring ordinary people?

Follow-up interview

- You told me in the last interview that *My Chinese Star* was made under the guidance of Korean producers. Can you tell me more about the roles they played?
- I noticed that the third season of the show has been cancelled by the station. Why did they call it off?
- Forgive me if I am wrong. You seem to be quite dissatisfied with the fact that reality shows have to depend on the presence of famous celebrities. Why do

you feel this way?

- What impact does the SAPPRFT's recent regulations on reality television have on your programmes?

A senior producer of Beijing Enlight Media

- Please tell me about your job at Enlight Media.
- Please describe your roles in the recent two television programmes you participated in.
- Why do you think Reality shows are so widely-produced in China?
- What do you think are the keys to a Reality show's success?
- What are the difficulties that you frequently encounter in the production process of a Reality show?
- In the design and production process of the programme, do you use ordinary people's cultural life as important source material?
- How do you respond to the comment that reality television programmes' tend to ignore ordinary citizens while concentrating on celebrities?

A programme director of ZJST

- Please tell me about your job at Zhejiang Satellite TV.
- Please describe role in the *Voice of China*.
- What do you think are the keys to the *Voice of China*'s success?
- What are the difficulties that you encountered in the production process of a Reality show?
- In the design and production process of the programme, do you use ordinary people's cultural life as important source material?
- What do you think of the comment that reality television programmes' tend to ignore ordinary citizens while concentrating on celebrities?

Sun Zhigang. A senior programme producer and Director of ZJST

- Please tell me about your job at Zhejiang Satellite TV.
- Please describe your work in the recent three television programmes you participated in.
- Why do you think Reality shows are so widely-produced in China?
- What do you think are the keys to a Reality show's success?
- What are the difficulties that you frequently encounter in the production process of a Reality show?
- In the design and production process of the programme, do you use ordinary people's cultural life as important source material?
- How do you respond to the comment that reality television programmes' tend to ignore ordinary citizens while concentrating on celebrities?

A senior programme director of HNST

- Please tell me about your jobs at Zhejiang Satellite TV.
- Why do you think Hunan TV is so good at making Reality shows?
- Can you describe your work at *Super Girl*?
- What do you think are the reasons behind *Super Girl's* success?
- How do you respond to the comment that reality television programmes' in China tend to ignore ordinary citizens while concentrating on celebrities?

Follow-up interview

- What do you think of comment that the *Super Girl* represent the victory of mass culture over elite culture?
- What impact does the SAPPRFT's recent regulations over reality television on your programmes?
- HNST has launched *Back to Field (Xiangwangde Shenghuo)*, *Chinese Restaurant (Zhongcanting)*, *Who is the Murderer (Mingxing Dazhentan)*, and

quite a few other celebrity reality shows this year. It seems like you have presented celebrities, other families and relationships in so many different ways. Do you think if the focus on show-biz stars will continue?

A deputy director of the Advertising Department of HNST

- Please tell me about your jobs at HNST.
- Please describe your routine work at the project you are working for.
- Why do you think Hunan TV is so good at producing entertainment programmes?
- Can you describe your work at *Super Girl*?
- Can you explain to me the advertising strategy of the programme?
- What do you think are the key to *Super Girl*'s commercial success?

Follow-up interview

- You told me in the last interview that Mengniu Group had a deep collaboration with you in producing the *Super Girl*. Can you explain in detail how you collaborated with the company?
- Congratulations on the success of *Idol Trainee (OuXiang Lianxisheng)*! How do you describe the influence of Korea's reality shows on China in recent years?

Li Xiang. Production manager of *Zero Distance* (2001-2009)

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *Zero Distance*.
- Please describe your routine work at the programme
- What do you think are the major reasons that contribute to *Zero Distance*'s success?
- What are the major frustrations that you encounter in the production process of the show?
- Why did you and your colleagues chose to produce a television programme

that focuses on people's everyday life in the first place?

- How do you respond to the comment that the Minsheng programme is 'excessively entertaining'?

Follow-up interviews

- In our last interview, you mentioned the "drop of standard" of *Zero Distance* since the mid-2000s. What are the causes of it?
- What measures did you take in order to avoid the 'vulgar' trend which *Zero Distance* was repeatedly criticised for?
- You emphasised on the negative impacts of government censorship on the programme. How often was *Zero Distance* affected by censorships?
- You mentioned that "all Minsheng programmes should introduce some elements of entertainment but avoid losing its focus on ordinary people". In your opinion, how can a programme achieve both ends?

A senior news editor of JPT

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *Zero Distance*.
- Please describe your routine work at the programme
- What do you think are the major reasons that contribute to *Zero Distance's* success?
- What are the major frustrations that you encounter in the everyday production of the show?
- To what extent are news workers at the programme able to truthfully depict local residents' living reality?
- How do you respond to the comment that the Minsheng programme is 'excessively entertaining'?

Follow-up interview

- In our last interview, you lamented that “in-depth news investigation has withered in China”. What do you think that leads to the decline of this type of programming?
- Compared with the mid-2000s, there seems to be much less investigative reports produced by *Zero Distance*. Is it true? Why is it the case?
- You told me that “nowadays people with ability and talents all want to make entertainment”. What factors led to the situation?

What do you think of lieqi news?

Tian Li. Senior programme producer of JPT

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *Zero Distance*.
- Please describe your routine work at the programme
- What do you think are the major reasons that contribute to *Zero Distance*'s success?
- Why did you chose to join a television programme that focuses on people's everyday life in the first place?
- What are the major difficulties that you encounter in the production process of the show?
- What do you think of the comment that the Minsheng programme is 'excessively entertaining'?

Follow-up interviews

- In our last interview, you mentioned that commercial sponsors taught television workers to demassify (分众化) in order to attract specific group of audience. Can you elaborate on that?
- I noticed that in recent episodes of *Zero Distance*, you put a lot of focus on sexual harassments on subways. Why do you give so much attention to this topic?

- What measures have you taken to promote the programme on digital platforms?
- You said now you need to undertake much more political tasks than before. As a Mingsheng programme, how do you balance the coverage of provincial leaders' activities, government policies and issues concerning people's livelihood?

A journalist of JPT

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *Zero Distance*.
- Please describe your routine work at the programme
- What do you think are the major reasons that contribute to *Zero Distance's* popularity?
- What are the major difficulties that you encounter in the production process of the show?
- Why did you choose to join the programme in the first place?
- What do you think of the comment that the Minsheng programme is 'excessively entertaining'?

A news editor of JPT

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *Zero Distance*.
- Please describe your routine work at the programme
- What do you think are the major reasons that contribute to *Zero Distance's* success?
- What are the major frustrations that you encounter in the production process of the show?
- Why did you and your colleagues chose to produce a television programme that focuses on people's everyday life in the first place?
- How to you respond to the comment that the Minsheng programme is

“excessively entertaining”?

Li Na. Senior programme producer from Hubei Provincial TV

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *Jingshi Live*.
- Please describe your routine work at the programme
- What did you and your colleagues chose to set up a Mingsheng programme at Hubei TV in the first place?
- What do you think are the major reasons that contribute to *Jinshi Live*'s popularity in Hubei?
- What are the major difficulties that you encounter in the production process of the show?
- I notice that the Propaganda Department of Hubei recently criticised *Jingshi Live* for being too entertaining. How do you respond to the criticism?

Follow-up interview

- You mentioned in the last interview that one of the major aims of the *Jingshi Live* was to give more political voices to the public. Why was this aim important to you?
- What do you think of the reforms *Jingshi Live* has taken in recent two years? How satisfied are provincial leaders with your reforms?

A senior programme producer from Hubei Provincial TV

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *Jingshi Live*.
- Please describe your routine work at the programme
- Why did you join *Jingshi Live* in 2012?
- What do you think are the major reasons that contribute to *Jinshi Live*'s popularity in Hubei?
- What are the major difficulties that you encounter in the production process of

the show?

Follow-up interview

- In our last interview, you repeatedly emphasized the impact of propaganda department on your everyday work. Do you have any mechanism or strategies that deal with political regulations and censorships?
- You also mentioned that there is a gap in the “overall level” (总体水平) of news programmes between Hubei and more developed regions in China. In your opinion, what is the gap?
- There is a general decline of Minsheng programmes nationally. Do you think if any further breakthroughs can be made in order to save this genre of TV news?

A programme producer of Hubei Provincial TV

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *Jingshi Live*.
- Please describe your routine work at the programme
- Why did you leave Hubei Satellite TV and joined the programme in 2014?
- Why did you chose to join a television programme that focuses on people's everyday life in the first place?
- What do you think are the major reasons that contribute to *Jinshi Live*'s popularity in Hubei?
- What are the major difficulties that you encounter in the production process of the show?

A vice producer-in-chief of *Zero Distance*

- Please tell me about your roles in the television programme *Zero Distance*.
- Please describe your routine work at the programme
- What do you think are the major reasons that contribute to *Zero Distance*'s success?

- What are the major frustrations that you encounter in the production process of the show?
- Why did you and your colleagues chose to produce a television programme that focuses on people's everyday life in the first place?
- How to you respond to the comment that the Minsheng programme is 'excessively entertaining'?

Follow-up interview

- How do you implement 'zou zhuan gai' in concrete operations?
- You mentioned in the last interview that there are huge gap between ideas and practice with regard to Mingsheng programme. In your opinion, what are the gaps?
- You emphasized that news workers aspire to "hold up to the heavens and to support the earth" (顶天立地). Can you elaborate on this and give me some examples?
- You have worked as a journalist, a news editor, a programme director and an producer-in-chief. I am really impressed by your rich experience. In your opinion, what is the primary function of television news?

Liu Chang. A senior programme producer of HNST

- Please tell me about your jobs at HNST.
- Please describe your routine work at the current project.
- Why do you think Hunan TV is so good at producing entertainment programmes?
- Can you describe your work at *Super Girl* season one and two?
- What are the major difficulties that you encountered in the Super Girl project?
- Can you explain to me the talent selection process of the show?
- What do you think are the key to *Super Girl's* success?

Appendix 4: Programme headlines of Zero Distance (Feb. 1st 2002)

二月一号串联单		
排序		长度
1	和西大街发生两起车祸	2'50"
2	中山东路发生一起连环车祸	3'39"
3	一名外地人当街自杀	2'14"
4	居民收到奇怪包裹	4'59"
5	奇人：仅靠花生和水生活 17 年	1'30"
6	农民工：南京的“脊梁”	6'21"
7	老张和他孩子们的故事	18'31"
8	调查：今年的大米吃起来安全吗？	7'20"
9	读报：为什么公共交通改革会失去公共信任？	3'24"
10	读报：传统‘贤妻’是否正在失去吸引力？	4'30"
11	话题：南京人是否歧视“外地人”	1'57"

