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MAINSTREAM CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND AUDIENCE CITIZENSHIP:  
DISPUTE RESOLUTION REALITY SHOWS IN TRANSITIONAL CHINESE SOCIETY

by

Yafei Zhang

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy  
degree in Mass Communications in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

August 2017

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Dan Berkowitz

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Yafei Zhang

has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree  
in Mass Communications at the August 2017 graduation.

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Wenfang Tang

To my dear parents

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## ABSTRACT

This project explores cultural productions in one television genre in Chinese mainstream media: dispute resolution shows. By applying the theoretical frameworks of Hall's *encoding and decoding* and Habermas' public spheres, this project mainly answers four research questions: 1) how does mainstream production convey politically-preferred cultural and social values to viewers; 2) what are online audience members' attitudes towards crucial agents in the cultural production; and 3) how do audience members exercise their citizenship in decoding televised social values and cultural norms? 4) How does the public understand and react to Chinese dispute reality television in general? In a specific examination of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, mixed-methods are adopted, including content analysis, thematic analysis, focus groups, and interviews.

In the findings, the interviewees admitted that they propagated social and cultural values in accordance with the mainstream political ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in order to maintain social stability and state order. However, my interviewees also suggested that they had an ambition and willingness to promote a civil society in China, which requires a counterbalanced power from the audience's side. The results of the audience analysis generally indicated that they challenged the power of legitimate authorities, including the nation-state, the elite class, and the media. This project identified five themes in online public spheres: 1) Government is the core; 2) Request for rule of law; 3) Media is a paradox; 4) The elite class is not the boss; 5) The grass is always greener (adoration of foreign countries).

In general, this project supports conceptualizing audience members as citizens. It demonstrates how audience members deconstruct the dominant interpretations of social values and their attempts to elaborate less-favorable voices in transitional Chinese society.



This conceptualization suggests the importance of audience members in creating diverse public spheres and promoting a civil society.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This project examines cultural productions in both traditional media and social media in contemporary Chinese society. The dissertation intends to answer 1) how do producers embed socialist preferred readings of social norms and values in their productions; and 2) how do audience members decode televised representations of social norms and values. Specifically, I juxtapose traditional media, reality television, and emerging new media—such as social network sites—to examine cultural production systematically via reality television production and audience online engagement. In order to achieve this goal, both quantitative and qualitative research methods are employed. We can observe polysemic cultural interpretations of media content by viewers. Polysemic interpretations by audience members are particularly remarkable with respect to the convergence of media, or media merge, which empowers the public to exercise their active citizenship in an open, diverse, and accessible communicative space. Therefore, examining how the public is influenced by media and how the public actively engages with media helps us understand how they make sense of contemporary society.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

On October 12, 2015, a woman claimed that she was attacked by two gigantic dogs while rescuing a 10-year-old girl from them. The woman was severely bitten by the two dogs and fell into a coma. Unfortunately, the rescued girl fled and the owner of the dogs could not be identified due to the absence of surveillance cameras. This depicted scene took place in a small town in Anhui province, China. The woman's husband told the story to local newspapers and television stations in order to attract public attention and initiate fundraising to cover the cost of his wife's medical treatment.

Immediately, numerous news agencies reported on this woman's courageous act. Meanwhile, the story also circulated quickly on Weibo, including discussions of the woman's traumatic condition and the need for donations. Weibo, the most popular social media site in China, is a hybrid of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Polumbaum, 2012). Weibo, which is the property of Sina Corp, is not the only such social media site; in fact, other rivals such as Tencent and Netease have created a competitive market (Gu, 2014; Wang, 2013). However, as the initiator, Sina Weibo is still the leader in the number of active users (Wang, 2013). Sina Weibo allows for mutual communication between the public and official media organizations. As such, any updates about the comatose woman could cause fervent conversations and fierce speculation.

Several days later, the story was dramatically reversed. Some insiders disclosed that the two gigantic dogs, in fact, belonged to the woman's husband. In addition, the existence of the 10-year-old girl was completely fabricated. At that moment, the heroic image of the woman collapsed. The false story provoked the public's anger and recriminations towards the woman and her husband on Sina Weibo. This in turn triggered intense debates on trust,

morality, benevolence, evil, and other social norms. In the end, this story turned out to be a charity scam plotted by the woman's husband and a reporter from a local television station.

In the aftermath of this incident, Chinese people questioned the truthfulness of charity and donation organizations as well as the social responsibilities of the media. Although there are countless explanations showing how transparently and authentically charity organizations operate, many citizens still doubt them and are suspicious of media accountability and charity management. On November 16, 2015, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* brought this incident to the television screen. In its broadcast, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* invited the woman's husband, a representative of the donors, and an expert in charity management to the show. The woman's husband told the public how the story was fabricated as a charity scam and how he lied about it. The expert from one representative charity organization also told the public how seriously they screen donation requests. After the broadcast of this episode, many audience members went to the program's official Sina Weibo account and commented on the episode's official post. In turn, those audience members' comments quickly circulated on social media.

This incident triggered my interest in thinking about the purpose of this kind of television program in contemporary China, as well as how such programs are integrated into the current social media environment. Although the show *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* includes "newsroom" in its title, it is not a traditional television news program that broadcasts current affairs. Instead, it highlights controversial social events. Therefore, it can be considered the Chinese equivalent of dispute reality television shows, which depict social controversies and prompt the public to rethink their morality framework, social norms, governmental policies, etc. Chinese dispute reality television shows often adopt persuasive techniques and supplementary suggestions to alleviate adversarial positions and assuage tensions between disputants. Unlike mediation reality television shows, which target family



issues and personal conflicts, dispute reality television shows underscore conflicts at a societal level.

There are a variety of dispute reality television shows broadcast on both Chinese provincial and central television stations (Feng, 2011). Although they vary in format and topic, they all provide irreplaceable platforms to support and disseminate social values (Feng, 2011). Many debate reality television shows have opened their own official Sina Weibo accounts in order to initiate conversations amongst their audience members. *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* is representative of the Chinese dispute reality television shows that feature the controversial social problems widely recognized by the public, including school bullying, pre-marital pregnancy, injustice, sexual harassment in schools, etc. *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* thus appears to deal with conflicts at a macro societal level, but it is also closely relevant to individuals living in Chinese society.

Therefore, this dissertation employs a cultural paradigm to argue for the discriminating and opinion-leading role of Chinese dispute reality television shows in the context of disseminating information on social media. I am also motivated to examine how audience members of Chinese dispute reality television shows use social media to produce cultural meanings. In the transformation of Chinese society, the Internet has been extensively used by Chinese people to obtain information (Lei, 2001; Yang, 2003). With respect to the relatively stringent censorship in China, Chinese netizens are more eager to express their opinions online (Bamman, 2012). The development of a civil society carrying more democratic components, such as transparency, fairness, integrity, and individualism, has become a trending topic in contemporary China. One social impact of the Internet in China is the rise of public spheres with more deliberate contributions from the public (Wang, 2013; Yang, 2003). In this highly competitive media market, television has frequently been criticized as a non-innovative and old-fashioned media form without value (Newman, 2009).

However, Harrington, Highfield, and Bruns (2013) argued that social media cannot replace the role of television, but rather enhance television programs by providing “talking points” (p. 405). These “talking points,” undoubtedly constitute public spheres on social media.

I find it compelling to explore the mutual relationships between television and social media as well as how audience members engage with these two media forms. The cultural paradigm can capture and explain social phenomena with deeper social or political meanings. While most reality television in China merely focuses on entertainment programs, this investigation into dispute reality television shows can shed light on the social responsibility of media in a broader way. There are tangled relationships among television, social media, and audience members since both television and social media want to maximize their target audience.

This dissertation examines the dynamic relationships among these three categories. Anything new on social media can be considered out-of-date after just a few minutes, which contributes to numerous misleading and inauthentic messages. Television, the most credible source for Chinese people (Zhou, Zhang & Shen, 2014), in combination with social media, can make audience members more engaged with its content. Because it is the most credible media source, television plays an indispensable role in disseminating reliable information (Zhou, Zhang & Shen, 2014). Therefore, incorporating meaningful social topics into broadcasts helps to facilitate a positive relationship between the media and society. In order to visualize my research topic, the following conceptually-driven model (Figure 1) shows the circle of communication among different media forms and players, including the government, media organizations, and ordinary citizens. My project includes both mainstream media and new media to examine the dynamic relationships among media forms as well as the audience members’ contribution to this hybrid media structure:

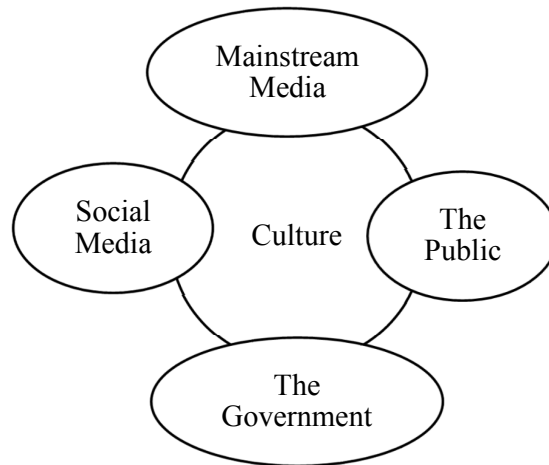


Figure 1. A Model of Culture Embedding and Understanding by Media and Society

In order to explore these dynamic relationships, an investigation of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* fits well conceptually. *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* invites real parties to the stage and reifies social meanings with discussions of a wide range of controversial social issues, including the protection of patient rights after plastic surgery failures, rampant human trafficking, the prevalence of corruption, bribery, and mistresses among officials, grassroots celebrity activists, etc. These social controversies are critical to discuss in transitional China, and audience members' engagement with these topics on social media also implies how they contextualize their understanding of social representations on television.

To explore these concepts, the project employs mixed methods, including a content analysis, thematic analysis of online audience members' comments on the official Sina account of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, interviews with the producer and directors of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, and focus groups consisting of offline audience members.

- First, I conducted face-to-face interviews with the producer and directors of this program in order to explore their understandings of the cultural and social meanings that are embedded in the program.

- Second, I conducted a content analysis, focusing on online audience members' attitudes towards the televised roles of the government, elite class, and media.
- Third, I conducted an online observation of audience members' comments on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom's* official Sina Weibo account, from the first broadcast in 2015 to the most updated episode. These observations generated several main themes in the cultural meanings that audience members discussed on the social media platform.
- Fourth, I held focus groups with offline audience members in order to understand how they articulate the program's impact on themselves and society at large as well as their potential active roles in contributing to public spheres.

*Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* focuses on the negotiation of different interpretations of social controversies from various voices, rather than the government's promoted narratives. Therefore, in both my face-to-face interviews and focus groups, I tried to detect subversive values that were not consistent with core socialist values, such as individualism.

Although this dissertation is about Chinese media, its conceptual contribution extends beyond the scope of Chinese scholarship. This project aims to supplement studies on media hybridity and audience research in non-Western countries. Unlike descriptive research on social media or television, this project argues for the existence of cultural connotations in media and the public's polysemic interpretations. Furthermore, this dissertation explores and explicates the cultural and social meanings that people perceive while using media. The cultural paradigm helps illustrate the mutual relationships between media and society. It also displays how socially and culturally constructed meanings are integrated into media production and how audience members perceive these constructed values. In addition, the cultural paradigm allows me to interrogate studies of production, texts, audiences, and socio-political contexts in one system.

Moreover, the interpretations of cultural meanings are better situated in a macro-level socio-political context. The cultural paradigm does not place the government and media in dichotomous positions. Instead, it allows me to explore the diverse ways in which ideology is being negotiated by the Chinese central government, media, and citizens. In general, the significance of this project lies in its exploration of the media environment across multiple media forms as well as cultural production at various levels.

In addition, this paper attempts to address the complicated relationship between media and society in contemporary Chinese society through the lenses of cultural production and perception. One critical social responsibility of the media is to reflect and present promoted social values and social norms via its content. Television and social media play essential roles in constructing discourses through which people can understand the society they live in. The discourses and representations in media can help the public deconstruct the cultural meanings in their daily lives. Beyond the individual stories that dispute reality television shows display, they also provide a wide-angle perspective of important social controversies that affect the public's everyday life. Television successfully personalizes these social controversies, retains the audience's attention, and strengthens the audience's connection to society as a whole.

Therefore, unlike the traditional presumption of passive audience members, many scholars have acknowledged that viewers of television and consumers of social media have become unexpectedly active in cognitively digesting media content, participating in interactions, and voicing their opinions. This also explains why we can observe polysemic cultural interpretations of media content by viewers. The polysemic interpretations become more remarkable with respect to media convergence, empowering the public to exercise their active citizenship in an open, diverse, and accessible communicative space. Examining how the public is influenced by the media and how the public actively engages with the media

can help us understand how they make sense of contemporary society. The on-going changes in Chinese society are substantially influencing people's daily lives. Television and social media play indispensable roles in shaping and disseminating relevant information to the public. In other words, analyzing Chinese dispute reality television affords a valuable lens through which I can explore how the media mediates the relationship between individuals and society.

In chapter two and chapter three, I will present a comprehensive examination of this project's theoretical framework, the media environment in the Chinese context, and research questions. Then, four studies are presented, including 1) an analysis of interviews with the producer and directors of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*; 2) an examination of online audience members' attitudes towards the government, elite class and media in addressing controversial social issues; 3) an in-depth analysis of audience citizenship in discussing controversial social issues; and 4) the public discourse towards Chinese dispute reality television. Although the four studies are independently presented, they are examined together to illuminate the core idea of cultural productions in the mainstream media and audience members' polysemic interpretations of mainstream social values and cultural norms. In the end, a concluding chapter will provide an overview of the theoretical and methodological contribution of this project.

## CHAPTER II

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

#### ENCODING/DECODING AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Some reality television and new media studies failed to anticipate the intersection between these two media forms (Deng, Xu, Fu & Ma, 2013; Li, 2013; Nabi, 2007). However, with the rising popularity and the expanding use of the Internet from the 21st century, media convergence has become an inevitable trend in mass media research. This project builds on previous literature from television and social media studies with an emphasis on cultural production from various entities, including television programs, online audience member posts/interactions, and the public offline within the Chinese context. Since all constructed meanings in media are in some way encoded, and audience members need to decode these meanings for themselves, this dissertation uses Hall's *encoding and decoding* (2012) as its fundamental theory. Regardless of the school—the British school, the Frankfurt school, or postmodernists in cultural studies—all media scholars recognize the importance of social constructions that are presented in media products, such as age, race, class, gender, etc. (Durham & Kellner, 2012). The British school emphasizes that culture permeates our daily lives in a natural way (Turner, 2003). The Frankfurt school highlights critical and transdisciplinary perspectives in cultural studies (Kellner, 2002). Postmodern cultural studies feature global and transnational capitalism in current entertainment and information-oriented societies (Kellner, 2002). From both the production and audience perspectives, cultural studies of media contribute to our understandings of social and political issues via audience (Levine, 2001). Cultural studies originated in Britain with Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, who focused on literary-social assessment with a renewed emphasis on and awareness of Marxist ideology (Johnson, 1986/87).

Stuart Hall's *encoding and decoding* integrates studies of production, texts, audiences, and socio-political contexts into one system. The most significant contribution of Hall's model lies in its recognition of viewers' diverse decoding in different contexts. Instead of a linearity between senders and receivers in communicating media messages, Hall advocates for a circle of media communication, including production, texts, audiences, and reproduction (Hall, 2012). Meaning is a key concept in Hall's model, and audience perception and practices are the result of decoded meaning. The essence of encoding and decoding is the concept of "degrees of symmetry" (Hall, 2012, p. 139), which measures the extent to which encoding is consistent with decoding. However, it is also common to observe asymmetry between the interpretations of encoders and decoders. Although there is a "dominant preferred meaning" (Hall, 2012, p. 141) from those in power, the public can easily subvert the dominant reading (Hall, 2012). Nonetheless, Hall fully recognizes the unavoidable limits and parameters to the audience's autonomy in decoding. In other words, absolute independence in audience decoding is only an ideal situation, one which lacks the constraints and disregards the power of the encoding process.

Hall (2012) rejects the possibility of a perfect overlap between encoding and decoding interpretations because of various intervening factors. However, Hall does suggest that some degree of reciprocity between encoding and decoding interpretations is expected in order to achieve effective communication. Otherwise, communication would be meaningless since the audience could interpret encoded meaning any way they wanted to. Since preferred meanings of dominant ideologies are embedded in media, miscommunication and misunderstanding between those at the top and those at the bottom of power hierarchies frequently take place. Hall (2010) developed three hypotheses with respect to decoding the constructed meaning in television programs. The first hypothesis is the "*dominant-hegemonic position*" (Hall, 2010, p. 570). According to this hypothesis, viewers decode the



meaning of a television newscast or other television programs within the realm of preferred readings, exactly in line with the encoded meaning. These are “taken-for-granted” messages (Hall, 2010, p. 570). Morley describes this dominant-hegemonic position in the following way:

For some sections of the audience and the codes and meanings of the programme will correspond more or less closely to those which they already inhabit in their various institutional, political, cultural, and educational engagements, and for these sections of the audience their dominant encoded in the programme may well “fit” and be accepted. (1980, p. 159)

The dominant-hegemonic hypothetical communication style is ideal for encoders due to the effortlessness of entrenching preferred readings in viewers.

The second hypothesis is “*negotiated code*” (Hall, 2010, p. 571). Negotiated interpretations between encoding and decoding encompass both adaptive and oppositional components (Hall, 2010). From this perspective, although viewers acknowledge the power of the hierarchy and the dominant code, they are also flexible in contextualizing the dominant code according to its local conditions. Therefore, negotiated codes afford the public leeway in voicing some contradictions or disjuncture to the dominant code. The third hypothesis, that of “*oppositional code*,” directly challenges the “*dominant-hegemonic position*” (Hall, 2010, p. 571) because viewers can reframe everything that is contrary to the dominant code. That is, the equilibrium between the hierarchy and the public is entirely rejected by the public. Oppositional code indicates an obvious failure in effective communication between encoders and decoders, and there is no chance to reach consensus. The possibility that the dominant code, negotiated code, and oppositional code can exist simultaneously highlights one fundamental perspective in cultural studies: polysemic meanings. Polysemic meanings embrace a variety of interpretations instead of promoting a single dominant one. Therefore,

the concept of polysemic meanings can be used to describe the nature of active audience members, who can create their own interpretations (Croteau & Hoynes, 2013; Fiske, 1986; Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Morley, 2003).

In addition to the influence of producers in encoding and audience members in decoding ideological messages, the government also influences the production of encoded meaning. In this instance, producers must first decode the government's encoded meaning in their process of production. Regarding codes, Hall claims that codes reflect social relations. Some codes are in natural forms and are regarded as "common sense" (Hall, 2012, p. 140), and some connotations of codes bear preferred meanings that mirror social order and structure. Even though there is a "selective perception" (Fiske, 1986; Hall, 2012, p. 142; Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2013) of codes, the audience members choose from available "preferred meanings" (Fiske, 1986; Croteau & Hoynes, 2013; Hall, 2012, p. 141). Hence, to some extent, codes are reflections of hegemony. It is not surprising that our decoding of media is mostly based on the hierarchical social relations we have accepted in reality. Therefore, the socio-political contexts of decoding can influence audiences' connotative understandings of social practices. In addition to Hall's model, Johnson (1986/87) proposes more mutually influential relationships among production, audience members, texts, and socio-political contexts. Apart from traditional influential factors on audience decoding, such as class and cultural aspects, Morley (1986) argues that "experiences of life" can also affect decoding (pp. 42-43). Along with the capitalistic examination of labor in production, Johnson advocates for an investigation into cultural elements, such as language, discourse, and context in encoding and decoding (Levine, 2001). Levine (2001) also states that the process of production shapes audiences' possible readings. Therefore, Levine (2001) suggests a holistic interpretative approach in investigating encoding and decoding, including consideration of media production and consumption.

Although Hall's conceptual framework is based on television, it can be applied to other realms as well. In studies of climate change communication, Carvalho and Peterson (2009) emphasized that the meanings of climate change were quite different at various levels of discourse. Many corporations in Europe admitted the importance of preventing climate change, but they were reluctant to accept the dominant codes in media coverage (Carvalho & Peterson, 2009). Therefore, Carvalho and Peterson (2009) suggested that the interpretation of media texts should extend beyond their literal meaning and delve into deeper cultural and social meanings. Worthington (2008) specified that in sexual assault news stories, more encoding is needed, and media consumers reacted to news texts according to the forums through which they accessed them. The suitability of using *encoding and decoding* as a theoretical framework for understanding the relationships between media and society should now be obvious: this paradigm seeks to uncover individual involvement at the micro-level in a macro-level socio-political environment.

### **The public spheres on social media**

The concept of the public sphere arose in the 18th century in the coffee houses of European countries where the bourgeoisie gathered together to discuss and debate social and political issues (Habermas, 1989). In transitional Chinese society, individuals are encouraged to voice their own social and political concerns under the overall ideological structure of the Chinese central government. Although media power in service of the central government cannot be neglected, the nature of active citizenship is also significant in current Chinese society. Hence, utilizing the cultural paradigm to examine Chinese people's engagement with media is pivotal to understanding the public sphere, and relationships between media and society.

Traditional public spheres created by television and newspapers have been expanded to include online social networking sites. An increasing number of Chinese people are

shaping and engaging with online discourse about social issues on Sina Weibo (Wang, 2013). Sina Weibo is the most well-known social networking site in China with millions of registered users (Wang, 2013). Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined social network sites as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

According to this definition, Sina Weibo has the irreplaceable potential to create a public sphere for Chinese people, especially for audience members to discuss their social and political concerns.

An initial connotation of the public sphere in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was its relative privacy, as only the bourgeois could participate in conversations (Bhargava & Reifeld, 2005). However, the bourgeoisie turned these private discussions into vibrantly social ones via media. They created their own newspapers, through which they publicized their private thoughts (Habermas, 1989). The public sphere mediates between the state and individuals, who can question political power. However, it is important to recognize the context of Habermas' public sphere, arising from the Marxist perspective of the structure of capitalistic societies within which the media system operated (Garnham, 2007). Many later scholars criticized the concept of the public sphere for its limitation to that specific social context, claiming it had little value in the current media landscape. Another blind spot lies in the overemphasis on the bourgeoisie with an ignorance of the working class and women (Crossley & Roberts, 2004; Goode, 2005). Other essential critiques include the presumed rationality of the public in discursive communication (Curran, 1991; Garnham, 2007) and the idealization of the 18th century European historical background (Hohendahl & Silberman, 1979).

In spite of these critics, Habermas still attempts to show the importance of a public sphere for connecting rational discussion and democracy, even in the era of digital media. Habermas (2006) states that current electronic media empower the public to produce public opinions in a broader and more efficient manner. Hence, the public feels more encouraged to take confirmatory or dissenting stances towards social and political issues. From this perspective, Habermas' public sphere can still be used to analyze democracy, civil society, and public participation in current society (Garnham, 2007). The public sphere is a critical component of democracy, and any democratic polity should guarantee that the public can participate in political decision-making (Habermas, 1989; Marcinkowski, 2008). The digital era has maximized media platforms for rational arguments and public opinion development, which are significant to the practice of democracy and civil society. Social media has turned many viewers into participants and active users who voice their personal understanding about specific social issues. The advent of social media enhances public interaction and participation in criticism of decision-makers (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2014).

The theoretical framework of the public sphere originated in Western democratic countries, and few of the updated studies on social media's contribution to the public sphere address non-democratic countries (Dahlberg, 2001; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010; Jensen, 2003; Strandberg, 2008; Wright & Street, 2007; Zheng & Wu, 2005). However, the emergence of public spheres in non-democratic countries cannot be overlooked. In general, not only the public but also politicians take advantage of the Internet and integrate the Internet into their discourses. Therefore, the Internet, as a contested terrain, both empowers and manipulates the public in forming rational, social, and political discourses. This is even more evident in authoritarian countries, such as China, which have exercised rigorous censorship of media and public opinions (Losifidis, 2011).

However, in China, social media is more loosely censored relative to traditional media. Although the state can quickly remove any potentially provoking messages from Sina Weibo to prevent wide circulation, the public can sometimes still successfully overcome this hurdle and temporarily share controversial content nationwide (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2014). In fact, social media is more effective in non-democratic countries for facilitating public spheres due to the relatively open and relaxed access. Although most topics on Sina Weibo are apolitical (Sullivan, 2012), there are still many discussions concerning social and political issues propelling the democratic development of Chinese civil society, which reflect active citizenship.

In response to growing interest in researching the public spheres in China, Rauchfleisch and Schäfer (2014) identified seven ideal-types of public spheres on Sina Weibo, including “thematic public spheres, short-term public spheres, encoded public spheres, local public spheres, non-domestic political public spheres, mobile public spheres, and meta public spheres” (p. 144-150).

- *Thematic public spheres* include public discussions of local political administrations, the social welfare system, real estate manipulation, retirement support, etc. These non-sensitive topics are closely related to people’s everyday lives, and enjoy a wide range of participants. The active public participation can drive more comprehensive understandings of these issues.
- *Short-term public spheres* refer to participation in problematic discussions that are not immediately censored by the government. Almost 30% of sensitive posts are deleted within 30 minutes of their release and 90% are removed from Sina Weibo within one day (Zhu, et al., 2013). However, on some occasions, the public is very quick to capture and disseminate these topics before their deletion, and discussions of these topics immediately flood social media (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2014).

- *Encoded public spheres* address very sensitive issues, like the Tiananmen Square Protest in 1989. In order to circumvent censorship, the discourse must be coded into pictures, cartoons, or similar words carrying the same connotative meaning with specific inference.
- *Local public spheres* are active only at local levels rather than at a national level. Local public spheres have obvious regional boundaries and are not necessarily engendered by nation-wide debates, nor do they have national resonance.
- *Non-domestic political public spheres* relate to non-domestic issues. These public spheres revolve around significant affairs happening outside of China, such as the U.S. presidential election, Middle-Eastern turmoil, and North Korean development trends.
- *Mobile public spheres* arise due to the ubiquitous use of mobile phones. Sina Weibo content is less regulated on mobile phones than it is on computers since people can use screenshots to keep the evidence (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2014).
- *Meta public spheres* are those that criticize censorship itself. The public uploads pictures or screenshots in order to increase the transparency of sensitive issues because such images cannot be censored by Sina Weibo (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2014).

As a comprehensive, exploratory study of Chinese online public spheres, Rauchfleisch and Schäfer (2014) provide a strong background for categorizing Chinese public spheres in this research. Although they did not specifically examine public spheres that arose from popular culture, the overarching classifications of the public spheres on the Internet paved the way for me to identify emerging themes in audience members' comments on Sina Weibo. The boundaries of these seven public spheres are not clear cut and they sometimes overlap. However, the variety of public spheres indicates that although Sina

Weibo is conservative on many topics, it still meets the essential criteria for being a public sphere, such as open access, a large number of participants, and a variety of discussions of social and political concerns. In fact, Chinese people are completely aware of censorship, and they employ multiple strategies to evade it. Unlike the presumed hypodermic-needle model of the passive audience under strict censorship, the rise of Weibo in China suggests unexpected potential in cultivating multiple public spheres.

However, people's political and social concerns are not only expressed via explicit political news or "hard news". Forums on popular programs are also valuable communicative platforms for the public to initiate relevant political discussions (Coleman, 2007; Van, Zoonen, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2007). Therefore, these entertainment-oriented forums cannot be discarded in the research of public spheres since the informal conversations that take place on them also contribute to meaningful dialogues, especially when political discussions are so fragmented. Some scholars call this "life politics" or "lifestyle politics," which do not have a straightforward influence on political decision-making, but rather affect individuals' narratives of political and social issues (Bennett, 1998; Giddens, 1991). Indeed, deliberative democracy is "a process of producing public reasoning and achieving mutual understanding within the more informal communicative spaces of the public sphere" (Graham & Hajru, 2011, p. 20). These daily informal political conversations, which reference personal or individual experiences, can keep citizens involved in social, political, and cultural issues.

Graham and Hajru (2011) conducted a study of how reality television triggered political topics and produced public spheres on social media. They argued that entertainment-based discussions on social media afforded a different approach to producing political conversations than daily life. We cannot regard politics and popular culture as two unconnected topics. Instead, politics and popular culture are inevitably connected to each



other, and contemporary politics needs to be understood through the lenses of language and format use in popular culture (Street, 1997). Audience members have been blamed for their unfulfilled responsibilities as citizens (Madianou, 2005), but their active engagement in social and political discussions on social media can offset this traditional condemnation. They can actively participate in judging codes of conduct, moral frameworks, prevalent misreading articulation in policies, etc. The linkage between the media and society absolutely improves the mutual understanding between the state and the public.

In spite of severe censorship in authoritarian regimes, the Internet indeed provides more opportunities allowing Chinese people to participate in political and social issues (Gu, 2014; Lei, 2011; Yang, 2003; Zuckerman, 2013). Responding to the censorship on Sina Weibo, Chinese people always use social stenography, such as images and wordplay, to deliver information that is less likely to be censored. Popular social networking sites with non-activists have a more latent capacity to disseminate political information than the explicit blogs of political activists, which are extensively censored (Zuckerman, 2013). The boom of social media in China creates potential for the rise of public spheres, which propel citizen's political involvement and the democratization of the authoritarian regime (Shao, et al., 2012; Sukosd & Fu, 2013). Therefore, entertainment-based forums on Sina Weibo can largely liberate citizens, create public spheres, promote the transparency of politics, and facilitate the development of both society and political democracy.

With reference to my conceptual model briefly discussed in the introduction, culture is centered in and connected to different entities, including the government, mainstream media, social media, and the public. Regardless of the constructed meanings produced by television or through the polysemic decoding of diverse audience members, people try to understand cultural norms and social values in the society they live in. All these entities are involved in constructing ideologies in accordance to their preferred readings. Although

Chinese dispute reality television shows are supposed to promote the dominant ideology and reflect the current social scheme, there is still enough room for audience members to generate diverse decoding interpretations. With the prevalence of social media use, audience members can create multiple public spheres to voice their social and political concerns in transitional Chinese society via popular culture. The general public is also acutely aware of what television programs aim to deliver. Therefore, the conceptual foundation of my dissertation is appropriately located within the theoretical frameworks of Hall's encoding/decoding and Habermas' public spheres.

## CHAPTER III

### LITERATURE REVIEW:

#### MEDIA IN CHINA, CONCEPTUALIZATION OF AUDIENCE MEMBERS, AND AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

This chapter includes a comprehensive literature review of media in China, reality television, attitudes and connected viewing, and audience members' online participation. As a supplement to the previous chapter delineating the theoretical foundations, this chapter specifies previous research relevant to culture creation and dissemination in media and society.

#### **Media production and consumption in China**

Western research overwhelmingly characterizes Chinese mass media as a state-owned machine for repetitive propaganda (Redl & Simons, 2002). Although television in China has been stigmatized for serving political authority and strengthening the Party's manipulation of its citizens, television has also been commended as a positive agent. The former deputy director of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) said that the role of media in China was to act as the mouthpiece of the Party and that the media should lead public opinion correctly (He, 2008). However, under media marketization, audience members can access choices other than the preferred readings advocated by the central government (Lull, 1991). After China's march into WTO in 2001, the media industry was largely commercialized to decentralize control from the Party. For instance, foreigners could invest in international Internet companies and provide media content that was formerly prohibited by the Chinese government (He, 2008).

Researchers have shown strong interest in investigating whether media in contemporary China reinforce the one-Party state or weaken the current authoritarian regime by fostering democracy (Donald, Kean & Hong, 2002; He, 2008; Li, 2013; Stockmann,

2013; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Yu, 2009; Zhao, 1998; Zhao & Guo, 2005; Zhao; 2008, Zhu, 2012). In line with Lull (1991), Yu (2009) also acknowledges media as a catalyst for modernization, incorporating the State with social and cultural productions rather than polarizing the public and the government. Yu (2009) has explored three significant ideological concepts in Chinese media: marketization, decentralization, and socialization. The most fundamental question, however, still lies in democracy: do media reforms create a more democratic system in China? Since the public has been fully aware of the propagandistic role of Chinese official media, the marketization of media implies increasing credibility, which then promotes media consumption and persuasiveness among the public.

In a comprehensive investigation of perceived media credibility among a variety of media formats, including television, magazines, newspapers, radios, websites, and mobile devices, television is perceived as the most credible source by Chinese respondents (Zhou, Zhang & Shen, 2014). The commercialization of media diversifies approaches for audience member engagement with media as well as media influence on viewers under the authoritarian rule. The liberalization of media is more likely to be associated with the promotion of democracy while providing more possibilities for audience members to take action (Diamond, 2002; Lawson, 2002; Olukotun, 2002). However, the CCP dictates that the information delivered via commercial media cannot pose any potential threats to the regime (Shirk, 2011).

Understanding the production of media content in the Chinese media market is vital to knowing how public opinions are shaped. Stockmann (2013) and Zhu (2012) examine media production in press institutions and the central television station, CCTV. Marketization does not erode the state's power over information dissemination and propaganda, but strengthens the dynamic relationships between the state and society. To do so, audience requests are responded to and public discourses are heard in diversified ways

(Zhu, 2012). The influential statement of Siebert et al. (1973) generalizes that authoritarian states incorporate media to reinforce the legitimacy of their regimes. In recent years, many scholars have likewise claimed that marketed media boost the legitimacy of the Chinese authoritarian regime (Liebman, 2005; Shirk, 2011; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Stockmann, 2013; Tang, 2016). Stockmann (2013) specifically argues that media marketization does not destabilize all authoritarian regimes, for instance, China. As a one-Party state without rivals in elections, the marketization of media fortifies the authoritarian regime instead of weakening it.

China still has a highly centralized and politicalized mass media system (Zhou, Zhang & Shen, 2014). The boosted credibility caused by marketed media stimulates media consumption and trust in its content. In consequence, media marketization bolsters the effect of its information dissemination in shaping public opinion and understanding the mainstream political ideology via diversified channels (Stockmann, 2013). The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) has played an important role in implementing a series of policies in normalizing and legitimizing a variety of entertainment reality television programs. In 2008, the State Administration of Radio, Film & Television (SARFT)<sup>1</sup> issued a policy outlawing any reality television shows that featured bitter emotions, extramarital affairs, and other immoral displays due to their potential threats to social stability. In contrast, positive social demonstrations, such as benign and healthy family relationships, were advocated by SARFT (Wang, 2007). SARFT issued another announcement in 2011 regulating the overdevelopment of entertainment shows during primetime hours and requiring TV stations to support ethics building as part of their social

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<sup>1</sup> SARFT is no longer an independent department. It was incorporated into State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of People's Republic of China in 2013.

responsibility (SARFT, 2011). Despite censorship, the proliferation of the Internet since the 21st century in contemporary China has created a variety of popular forums covering a wide range of topics on dynamic discussions, indicating a high level of citizenship involvement in public issues among Chinese social media users (Yang, 2003).

### **Chinese media and the development of Chinese civil society**

In the report by the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, core socialist values were explicitly presented and advocated. Core socialist values are regarded as the guide to build socialism with Chinese characteristics. The core socialist values include “prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, upholding freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, advocating patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship” (Hu, 2012). Chinese citizens should observe, cultivate, and exercise these values.

China’s political culture is based on populist authoritarianism, which has strong group solidarity, political support, public engagement, responsiveness of the government, etc. (Tang, 2016). Responsive authoritarianism features a dynamic between the state and society indicating that the state allows audience members to have dissenting voices under its control (Stockmann, 2013). Responsive authoritarianism highlights public contributions to the stability of society.

The rise of dispute reality television shows resonates with the contentious discussion of civil society as well as the confrontational relationships between mediation and litigation. Social modernization since the early 1980s has not only stimulated economic and political development, it has also propelled reforms of the legal system in China. Chen (2012) optimistically states that legal reforms have achieved significant progress, and litigation has significantly replaced mediation in dealing with disputes and lawsuits. Many scholars still believe that legal reforms have placed an emphasis on mediation rather than adjudication (Fu & Cullen, 2011; Gallagher & Wang, 2011; Liebman, 2011).

The U.S. legal system is maintained by judicial decisions in previous cases as well as judges' interpretations of codified law, but the "socialist legal system with Chinese characteristics" in China is largely in favor of the CCP and its authoritarian regime (Wang & Madson, 2013, p. 2). Wu Bangguo, the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), advocated a socialist legal system in 2011, which is "scientific, harmonious, and consistent" (Xinhua, 2011). The Chinese legal system has its underpinnings in Confucianism (Wang & Madson, 2013). Confucianism believes that individuals are born to be moral and can take the initiative to improve themselves.

In order to exemplify Confucianism, the Chinese government therefore must model morality itself and educate others in morality through its behaviors. The CCP has incorporated the concept of a harmonious society into its rulings, which has caused a resurgence of Confucianism in contemporary China (Wang & Madson, 2013). Harmony and stability, values derived from Confucianism, are core components of Chinese society. Since self-censorship is also one of the core values in Confucianism, punishment is not perceived to be necessary (Johan, 2010; Solé-Farràs, 2008). That is, people can naturally behave well by monitoring themselves.

Although transparent justice procedures have been highlighted in the legal reform since the late 1970s, mediation still outweighs litigation in contemporary China's jurisprudence system (Fu & Cullen, 2011). Due to an increasing number of letters and visits, mediation can address petitions in order to guarantee the security and stability of society. Along with socialist modernization, individual rights have been highlighted, disputes augmented, and the ideology of a harmonious society strengthened. Thus, litigation and mediation are indispensable in balancing the socialist modernization of the Chinese legal system.

The role of mass media in the Chinese legal system is divergent. On one hand, the media challenge court authority by intervening in cases and asking for public appeals (Liebman, 2005; Liebman, 2011). On the other hand, the media also provide alternative avenues to disseminate information and allow the public to pursue justice and redress (Liebman, 2005; Shirk, 2011). Entertainment-oriented shows carrying political elements must also retain audience interest, so they have to be entertaining as well (Balkin, 1992). One form of these shows in China is dispute reality television shows, which highlight the relationships between the public and society on controversial issues. Although Chinese dispute reality television shows are not typical legal shows limited to topics on litigation, they do frequently display the importance of a healthy legal system in promoting Chinese civil society. Therefore, in seeking balance between mediation and litigation, Chinese society also repositions itself in the dilemma of incorporating democracy and preserving socialist core values in order to stabilize the regime.

### **Reality television**

Scholars have defined reality television in various ways, but one consistent element is the involvement of ordinary people instead of actors and celebrities (Nabi, et al., 2003). Since most reality television is appealing to audience members, viewers find its consumption irresistible. Entertainment has been labeled as the most influential territory of popular culture in the 21st century (Manovich, 2009). However, entertainment-based media in information-based societies can also disseminate related social, political, and cultural messages. With respect to the social implications of reality television, reality television embodies promises to mobilize the public to engage with social and political discourses (Kavka, 2012; Punathambekar, 2010). Morality and middle-class social values are frequently embedded in reality television shows, which attempt to propagate such values to all viewers (Skeggs, 2009). Besides traditional satisfaction from reality television, such as escapism, voyeurism,



time killing, entertainment, relief, etc., cognitive fulfillment, such as information seeking, also motivates reality television consumption (Godlewski & Perse, 2010). The knowledge gained from television can later contribute to online discussions of cultural and social events (Matrix, 2014).

Chinese dispute reality television shows display strong Chinese characteristics for the purpose of building socially-promoted morality, introducing preferred social values, improving basic legal knowledge literacy, and strengthening the mainstream ideology of the state. One prominent slogan for building a harmonious society, advocated by the former chairman Hu Jintao, has been embedded in many reality television programs in order to promote the dominant ideology. From the standpoint of the state apparatus, Chinese dispute reality television shows can influence audience awareness and attitudes and guide their behaviors (Singhal & Rogers, 2009). Therefore, it is very enlightening to look at conflicts on both individual and societal levels and to examine how disputes are structured and resolved in these shows.

Alongside Chinese dispute reality television shows, there is a similar genre called mediation shows. Mediation shows mainly feature the process of negotiation and problem resolution at an individual level. Mediation shows display models that propagate mainstream traditions and socialist values as well as cultural and social expectations for personal conflict management in contemporary Chinese society (Deng, Xu, Fu & Ma, 2013). Previous studies on mediation shows investigate the shows themselves, without taking into account production procedures and audience members.

Especially after the implementation of the People's Mediation Law in 2010, Chinese dispute reality television shows and mediation shows have enjoyed increasing popularity (Hawes & Kong, 2013). Undoubtedly, both types of reality television programs function as

social agents to discuss “law, morality, entertainment, and politics” (Hawes & Kong, 2013, p.750).

### **Conceptualization of audience members’ attitudes**

Audience members are defined as people who watched *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*. Since the television content is not fully released on the program’s Weibo account, the audience members who commented are likely to represent the group of people who watched the program on the air. Reaching a universal definition for attitudes is difficult since there have been hundreds of versions (Albarracin, Johnson & Zanna, 2014). I employ a contemporary definition from Eagly and Chaiken (1993), an “attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (p.1). Particularly, this project adopts the evaluative perspective to examine audience members’ attitudes (Ajzen, 2005; Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Breckler, 1984; Ostrom, 1969; Schwartz & Bohner, 2001). Studies using this approach can account for different constructs of attitudes and relationships between attitudes and behaviors. Theorists of the evaluative aspect agree that attitudes involve three distinct components: affect, cognition, and behaviors (Albarracin, Johnson & Zanna, 2014; Berkowitz, 2000; Breckler, 1984; Ostrom, 1969). Ostrom (1969) was one of the earliest scholars to evaluate the theoretical value in this tripartite model, and s/he concluded that these theoretically-driven measures showed unique determinants in each construct. More than a decade later, another study examined the validity of this tripartite model and further substantiated the discriminant validity among the three components (Breckler, 1984).

Affective attitudes focus on individual feelings or the absence of feelings towards a particular object, including favorable to unfavorable, pleasant to unpleasant (Ajzen, 2005; Berkowitz, 2000; Breckler, 1984; Ostrom, 1969). Cognitive attitudes pertain to individual beliefs, the recognition of the characteristics of an object, and additional inferences to other

relationships (Ostrom, 1969; Schwartz & Bohner, 2001). In other words, cognitive attitudes highlight people's understanding and recognition of the object or issue, which is clearly different from their emotional feelings. Behavioral attitudes indicate people's actions in terms of what they say, do, and would do in the past and future (Albarracin, Johnson & Zanna, 2014; Ajzen, 2005; Ostrom, 1969). This project draws upon these well-established constructs of attitudes, and examines audience members' distinct affectively-based, cognitively-based, and behaviorally-based attitudes towards the televised role of the government, the elite class, and the media in transitional Chinese society.

Although previous research has shown Chinese people's high level of political trust in the central government and the CCP, it has also shown low levels of trust in local government agents (Tang, 2016). Therefore, attitudes towards the government in general are mixed and complicated. Particularly with people's increasing awareness of government corruption at multiple levels, people implicitly and explicitly show distrust towards the government (Li, 2011). Trust becomes a more urgent issue in circumstances of uncertainties (Sztompka, 1999). For this reason, attitudes expressed on controversial social issues towards the role of the government in media are especially worthwhile to examine. Besides the government, trust in professional experts is also essential since the contemporary world is opaque for laypeople due to the complexity of technology and the global scope of knowledge (Sztompka, 1999). For ordinary individuals, it is hardly possible to have access to and understand all necessary information independently. Without trust in professional experts, society would be dysfunctional and paralyzed (Sztompka, 1999). This project defines the experts on stage as the elite class because, in China, most professional experts are comprised of intellectuals with higher education and sophisticated professional experience. Since current society expects high levels of trust in both the government and the elite class to sustain a stable and healthy social system, and because attitudes are soft variables of trust

(Sztompka, 1999), it is worthwhile to examine audience attitudes towards the televised roles of the government.

Contemporary Chinese media are involved in a tug-of-war between the government and the market (Zhao, 2008). The media face the dilemma of satisfying both the government and audience members, which is almost impossible (Xu, 2000). On one hand, media are burdened by high expectations to speak as the government's mouthpiece (Zhao, 2008). On the other hand, media seek to play a watchdog role, like Western media do, in defending pluralistic public opinions (Zhao, 2000). Since Chinese media are pertinent to its political and social responsibility, it is necessary to examine audience attitudes towards the role of media in televised controversial social issues.

### **Connected viewing and audience engagement on social media**

With the advance of technology and its implementation in the media industry, prolific research has reassessed how media is produced, circulated, and consumed. Nowadays, an increasing number of traditional media users tend to perform multiplatform media practices rather than engage in monothematic media consumption. In a survey administered by Pew Research Center in 2012, 52% of cell phone owners said that they used their phones to engage, divert from, or interact with people while watching television programs. 20% of these respondents admitted that they would like to use social media via phone or computers to see what other audience members said about the program. 19% of the participants said that they posted their thoughts concerning the televised content online (Smith & Boyles, 2012). These connected viewers immerse themselves in a multi-screen media experience. Connected viewing refers to “a multiplatform entertainment experience, and relates to a larger trend across the media industries to integrate digital technology and socially networked communication with traditional screen media practices” (Holt & Sanson, 2014, p. 1).

Connected viewing will inevitably affect the current media landscape in terms of active audience participation. Although there is much criticism of connected viewing with respect to its expansion of digital labor, or free labor, since audience members have more opportunities to produce data for advertisers and media conglomerates (Bird, 2011; Deller, 2011; Johnson, 2015; Terranova, 2000), the affordances provided by the second screen in facilitating user engagement cannot be ignored (Doughty, et al., 2014; Lochrie & Coulton, 2011; Pittman & Tecfertiller, 2015; Giglietto & Selva, 2014; Xu & Yan, 2011). More than 36 million Americans used Twitter to discuss the televised content they watched in 2013 (Nielsen, 2014). Twitter can keep audiences active during the broadcast of a program and increase audience attentiveness and commitment to the televised content. The traditional approach to engaging audience members via text voting has been extensively challenged by television's incorporation of social media. Extant research has investigated connected viewing across a variety of television programs, including news and entertainment (Deller, 2011; Giglietto & Selva, 2014; Lochrie & Coulton, 2011). Xu and Yan (2011) argued that different television programs provide disparate talking points on social media and that the purposes of audience engagement are various. Previous research has demonstrated that active engagement on social media can enhance social interactions, social integration, and on-going discussions (Matrix, 2014). The wide use of hashtags referring to televised content is another important component of social media (Pittman & Tecfertiller, 2015).

Jenkins (2008) proposed that the cultural production of fans was more powerful in the era of media convergence. Second screen engagement not only provides an alternative channel of communication between producers and audience members, it also enhances the information exchange and sharing among audience members themselves (Xu & Yan, 2011). Although there is a rich body of research on parasocial interactions between audience members and actors in television programs, viewers find it easier to connect with ordinary

people than with actors on television (Xu & Yan, 2011). Audience feedback turns into production and cultural production (Johnson, 2015). The synergy of television and social media enables audience members to feel empowered to actively influence the production (Poniewozik, 2006). Television is thus changing from an isolated traditional media into an integrated media system with new media forms and cultural sites (Roscoe, 2004). Along with the rising activeness of audience members on social media, the relationship between the audience, producers, and texts has become more complicated and intertwined (Pittman & Tecfertilizer, 2015; Roscoe, 2004).

Twitter did not replace traditional media, but rather complemented them. This trend is most noticeable alongside television, since Twitter is “a simple backchannel to live programming or more sophisticated uses” (Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, 2013, p. 405). Like Twitter, Sina Weibo has successfully permeated users’ daily lives. The length of messages is limited to 140 characters, which is, in fact, different from 140 letters in English as one Chinese character can stand alone for meaning (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2014). As a medium with more affordances, Sina Weibo inevitably catalyzes audience discussions and interactions. Used this way, Sina Weibo can specifically establish the linkage between audience members and specific television programs. In fact, it is possible to track audience activity concerning a specific television show on social media (Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, 2013). Liu (2015) conducted a study of how Chinese people use Sina Weibo to tweet, retweet, and comment on political or social issues in order to provoke online social movements. The results indicated that public spheres on Sina Weibo enable Chinese citizens to promote policy and social changes, but they do not allow a thorough subversion of current social and political structures, like the Arab Spring.

Previous scholars have tended to exaggerate the censorship of free speech in cyberspace, assuming that the Chinese government suppresses all dissenting and

confrontational opinions on policies, the state, leaders, mainstream ideology, and potential collective actions (Esarey & Xiao, 2011; MacKinnon, 2012; Marolt, 2011; Xiao, 2008; Shirk, 2011). However, King, Pan and Roberts state that the primary purpose of online censorship is to lower the probability of provoking any potential collective actions via social media (2013). Although television has been perceived as the mouthpiece to support the one-Party authoritarian regime, the Internet has undermined the power of the state due to its minimal control over production and information dissemination (Lei, 2011). In media convergence, Chinese dispute reality television shows have opened their own official Sina Weibo accounts in order to initiate conversations among audience members on posts. When audience members turn to social media as an alternative platform to discuss programs and interact with other audience members, they are more likely to express negative emotions after watching reality television (Godlewski & Perse, 2010).

Participatory culture has provided diversified platforms for audience members to challenge the mainstream voice and to make more minority voices heard. Jenkins (2008) reemphasizes that although fans' activities are limited to popular culture, their participatory actions could trigger deeper cultural meanings with regard to political and social processes. Social media provide more avenues for people to exert their influence over public concerns (Jenkins, 2012). The synthesis of reality television and social media provides a specific framework for us to understand audience participation in cultural, social, and political issues in cyberspace.

Therefore, media consumption in China cannot only be regarded as a necessary amusement for the public. Moreover, it should also be analyzed beyond this normative viewpoint. Cultural connotations in media products signify the prevalent social values and cultural norms that the public receives. In transitional Chinese society, it is worthwhile to explore how the public relates social controversies broadcast on Chinese dispute reality

television shows to their understanding of the society they live in. To do so, media convergence allows viewers to create multiple public spheres online and offline. Those public spheres are concerned with the social, political, and cultural meanings that are manifested by the televised content audience members have consumed. The function of some reality television programs in contemporary China is to provide serious and meaningful talking points to engage the public in discussing the social and political issues that are relevant to our daily lives. Chinese dispute reality television is one genre among them. Largely supported by the SAPPRT and other relevant bureaucratic organizations, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* allows the public to interrogate encoded content in multiple ways, including contradictory ones.

The synergy among different media forms provides a promising media environment, where both traditional media and new media co-exist. With the full incorporation of social media use in threading audience members' participation, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* should be well-situated in that synergy. The changing media environment also changes the approaches through which Chinese people understand society at the macro level. The complicated relationships between media and society can be examined from cultural productions in television programs and public spheres on social media. Therefore, the current project aims to explore the following four important perspectives: 1) the sophisticated relationships between media and society implicit in television productions, 2) audience members' attitudes towards crucial agents in controversial social issues; 3) audience engagement and citizenship on social media, and 4) the public's articulation of significant social values and norms that are embedded in television programs. In light of the current literature and problems, the project proposes the following research questions.

***RQ 1:*** How does Chinese dispute reality television produce and embed social values and norms?



**RQ 2:** What are audience members' attitudes toward televised media, the government, and the elite class in addressing controversial social issues?

**RQ 3:** What are the themes that audience members of Chinese dispute reality television develop on the created public sphere on Sina Weibo?

**RQ 4:** How does the public understand and react to Chinese dispute reality television in general?

The following table visually displays which research question is answered in the corresponding chapter. Chapter IV will address RQ 1, chapter V will address RQ 2, chapter VI will answer RQ 3 and chapter VII will answer RQ 4.

Table 1. The Outline of Studies and Corresponding Research Questions

RQs	Studies
RQ 1	Study 1: The Analysis of Interviews with the Producer and Directors
RQ 2	Study 2: Audience Members' Attitudes towards Crucial Agents on Social Media
RQ 3	Study 3: Audience Citizenship in Controversial Social Issues
RQ 4	Study 4: The Public Discourse towards Chinese Dispute Reality Television

## CHAPTER IV

### STUDY 1:

#### THE ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS WITH THE PRODUCER AND DIRECTORS

This chapter presents study 1, which addresses the first research question of embedded social values and cultural norms in mainstream cultural productions. Study 1 utilizes in-depth interviews with the producer and directors of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* to explore how values are incorporated in their productions. This section also includes my self-reflection while conducting interviews. The analysis mainly builds on the theoretical framework of Hall's encoding/decoding. The producer and directors answered structured interview questions concerning how they encoded mainstream social values and cultural norms of transitional Chinese society in the production. In addition, the analysis also draws previous literature the Chinese media environment and reality television production. This chapter begins with a thorough process of conducting in-depth interviews, followed by the analysis of interviews with frequently recurring themes.

#### **In-depth interviews**

Interviews are necessary to explore producers' thoughts in-depth. Taking Schröder's (2002) advice, I balanced thematic analysis of audience comments with producer interviews to avoid over-determining the textual meanings provided by the audience. Since encoded meanings could possibly be decoded in polysemic ways, the interpretations presented by audience members are not always identical to the meanings encoded by producers (Hall, 2010).

Interviewing is a commonly used approach in investigating media production (Zhu, 2012). In order to explore how producers encode socialist values, propagate policies, disseminate legal knowledge, and incorporate social norms into Chinese dispute reality television, interviews with the producer and directors of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* are

essential. Interviewing is one of the best methodological approaches to inquire about the producer and directors' personal feelings, their understandings of the program, and their perceptions of audience feedback. After a one-on-one interview with producers, email interviews were considered sufficient for follow-up questions if needed for producers to provide supplemental positions. From a time-efficiency standpoint, I avoided asking descriptive questions and yes or no answers. Instead, I kept questions consistent with structures and narratives (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). For instance, my interview questions with the producer included "Can you briefly explain how this program is produced? How do you select the themes for each episode? What are the preferred values that you embed in the program and convey to the public? What is the extent of control in the production?" In general, the questions are ordered to inquire first about the overall structure of the program and to move to finer details.

I obtained the required approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the interviews. I conducted three interviews, one with a producer and two with directors of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* in Shanghai, one of the biggest cosmopolitans in China. Since this dissertation only focused on one dispute reality television program, there was a limited number of producers and directors to interview. Although online interviews are an efficient and convenient way to collect data, producers of these dispute reality television shows may be difficult to reach online. In addition, online interviews require technology and quality communication equipment (Murthy, 2008). Therefore, traditional face-to-face in-depth interviews are suitable for this project. Moreover, by conducting face-to-face in-depth interviews, interviewees' facial expressions, gestures, and pauses in conversations could be observed.

I used purposive and snowball sampling strategies in recruiting participants. I was first introduced to A, the producer of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*. One of my friends once

worked at the Shanghai Dragon Television Station where this program is produced. After obtaining the consent of A, my friend gave me his contact information, including Wechat and email address. Wechat, invented by the technology mogul Tencent Holdings Ltd, is a popular communication service in China that integrates instant text and voice messaging (Lien & Cao, 2014). Similar to functions on WhatsApp, Wechat enables people to send and receive messages from different providers as long as they install the free app on their smartphones or tablets. I sent a friend request to producer A on Wechat, and he agreed to add me. In our conversations via Wechat, I introduced my general research purposes and the importance of the interviews with him. I also asked him to recommend two more directors to me since he was the only producer for this program.

Next, I received the contact information of the two directors from A and added both on Wechat. Before meeting with them, I sent a general question guide over what I was going to ask in our interviews. I spent one week in Shanghai and scheduled three appointments with them to hold face-to-face interviews. Producer A and director B are male and director C is female. They all graduated from renowned universities in Mainland China, and worked on the program for over 3 years. The male director was involved in *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* from its initial broadcast in 2010. The interviews with each of the two directors took place in a café at their workplace. The interview with the producer was in a quiet meeting room in their office building. I transcribed the interviews after finishing all of them instead of immediately transcribing each one to avoid unconsciously guiding interviews after listening to the first one. The number of interviewees is limited due to the fact that *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* went off the air in December 2015, and its staff were assigned to other programs. In this case, finding more directors of the program was difficult. Additionally, there was only one producer, unlike the different levels of producers in the American TV production system, which significantly reduced the number of interviewees. Since I only

conducted three interviews, it was manageable to transcribe after finishing all of them. All three interviewees agreed to be recorded. I consistently took notes when a theme appeared while transcribing. Then, I read through my notes and transcriptions to further identify and confirm emerging themes in my interviews.

## **Results**

The analysis elucidates both the commonalities and conflicts among the producer and directors with regards to their awareness of the marketization of media, the Party's influence on program content, and efforts to promote a civil society. From a Western perspective, a civil society is essentially synonymous with a good society. Apparent features of a civil society include citizens' freedom to form communities, to participate in political debates, and to restrict the decision-making power of the state (Keane, 2001). In general, the comments of the producer and directors of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* indicate that the social values that are embedded in Chinese dispute reality television are heavily influenced by media marketization and governmental interference.

However, they also attempt to embed some liberal values to promote the creation of a civil society in transitional China. Traditionally, the concept of civil society highlights the relationship between the state and society. By ensuring social order, a civil society can guarantee the rights and privileges of the people (Keane, 2001). Narratives of civil society are second nature to democratic countries. In China, where society can never completely separate itself from the state, the relationship between the government and society is not polarized (Brook & Frolic, 1997). However, this fundamental difference in the Chinese context does not mean it is completely excluded from the Western context. In an ideal society, individuals can make rational choices about the common good between society and the government via discourses in public spheres. The state is a proactive actor in state-society interaction. A civil society can be achieved through three main approaches: 1)

challenges to power from the elite class; 2) moderation of the market economy; and 3) the creation of public spheres at the grassroots level (Brook & Frolic, 1997). In transitional Chinese society where political, economic, and social problems arise, a desire for a more democratic society with empowered citizens is crucial. China's rising power on the global stage and its unprecedented domestic social problems increase the saliency of civil society. To address the various threads that are present in the production of televised media, this chapter is divided into three parts: the pressure to make money, government intervention, and efforts to build a civil society.

**Market encoding: Everything is about profit.** The transition in China to a market-oriented economy has not only caused transformations in politics and society, it has also extensively influenced Chinese media culture (Yu, 2009). The media environment in transitional Chinese society is undergoing tremendous changes with expanding globalization and growing media marketization. The largest media conglomerate in Beijing includes state media, such as China Central Television (CCTV), China National Radio, China Radio, and China International Radio. The second largest conglomerate is the Shanghai Media Group (SMG) (Yu, 2009). SMG includes a variety of media types, including Shanghai Television, Shanghai Oriental Television, radio stations, and advertising agencies. SMG positions itself as a strongly competitive media alternative to state media (Yu, 2009). However, SMG is market-oriented. In a market economy, the media industry is not insulated from the pressure to transform itself into a profit-making enterprise. The question of how to generate profits and survive in this competitive marketplace is the primary concern of most media companies, even state media. To achieve this goal, companies must not only create innovative content, but they must also have well-designed formats. As a representative example of Chinese dispute reality television, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* labels itself as a serious and rigorous social program, but the producer and one of the directors admitted that

elements of entertainment, such as dramatic expressions by the parties on stage, were necessary to attract audience members, improve audience ratings, and increase profits. The producer WH explained:

With consideration of the pressure of audience ratings in the television industry, including the audience members' expectations of television programs, it (*Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*) definitely includes or intentionally magnifies some entertainment components. Or it provides something attractive to audience members, you know, anything that can boost the audience ratings. Since our program is not an entertainment-oriented program, it is hard to attract as many audience members as entertainment programs do. Therefore, we need to introduce some entertainment elements to solve our predicament.

As WH revealed, he was aware of the importance of making money for the television station during the production process. Therefore, he consciously developed strategies to attract audience members. Although entertainment elements are not supposed to appear in this program given its serious discussions and debates about controversial social issues, market-based competition with other programs forced *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* to add entertainment elements. The fact that the producer included entertainment elements in production to satisfy the viewers showed that social values and norms were also commercialized. However, one director was quite critical on this point, dismissing my question about entertainment in *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*. NX said:

I do not see any elements of entertainment in *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*. I would only say that this program was down to the earth, so audience members liked it. Basically, we positioned our program as a very serious news reality television show, which was quite different from entertainment programs. If you mean some specific settings on stage or the program design, I would say that these are just approaches to telling stories. It is the audience members' over-interpretation of storytelling techniques. They misinterpret those as entertainment elements. We are not an entertainment show, you know, they are naturally growing to have more viewers.

On the surface, WH and NX's statements differ regarding whether the program incorporated elements of entertainment. In essence, they debated about whether the program content was contaminated by market-oriented assessments. Although NX did not admit there



were embedded entertainment elements in the program, he used another term, “storytelling techniques”. According to him, different storytelling techniques had varying appeals for audience members. Another director, YD, took a more neutral stance, citing some examples that were suitable to include entertainment elements, and some that were not. So, the production team knew that a large audience was vital for the program to survive. In this case, a related pitfall was viewers’ concerns about the credibility of the content. For instance, dramatic and sensational expressions used by the parties on stage could make audience members skeptical about the content. However, the production team did not see a binary choice between profit and content quality. For them, expanding their media market share was not the only goal; they also recognized the significance of high quality content. WH clarified:

The ultimate goal of this program was to reflect real social conflicts and analyze hot social issues. The authenticity of the topics was the top priority of our program, and we would not include any fake information in our content. Some techniques, such as the employment of audio and video clips, only aimed to highlight disagreements between the parties on stage.

From the production perspective, content quality was always prioritized, and all other strategies were built around and served this purpose. With the boom of entertainment programs in the media marketplace, audience ratings were significantly salient for these programs. In fact, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* stopped broadcasting in 2016. The sudden cancelation of this program was surprising, at least to loyal audience members. When they were asked why the program ended, all of my interviewees mentioned its failure to meet audience rating standards, which are indicators of making a profit. YD explained:

You know, although this was not an entertainment program, it had to meet the same standard as other programs made by Shanghai Dragon Television. Since it was a satellite program at prime time, it competed for ratings with other prime time television programs. You know, they are all entertainment programs. It is true that if you cannot squeeze into the first three places in the audience ratings, you are out. Undoubtedly, our program could not compete with them.

WH added to this point:

Frankly speaking, it is the inevitable result for news programs in this era. If you look across satellite television, this kind of program is really not very common. This category of program is not without substance. The fact is that you devote much effort to making this kind of show, but it receives little reward from the market. The television station wants to optimize its resources with those highly entertainment-oriented programs. The tendency of market-oriented media is still obvious. Entertainment programs are becoming the mainstream trend in television production.

Both YD and WH pointed to the fierce competition between social/news programs and entertainment programs. Satellite television stations competed to make themselves more prominent and catered to audience preferences. In fact, SARFT issued a regulation prohibiting the development of overheated entertainment programs during prime time in 2011. Instead, the state encouraged society-oriented programs to reinforce positive ethics and social stability (SARFT, 2011). However, it is clear that many satellite television stations found ways around the injunction from the state and the government. When I expressed my concerns about this entertainment trend, WH reminded me:

You are forgetting Chinese Central Television. They still have programs like *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, but not many. The golden age of producing such programs has faded. Even though there are some left, they lack public supervision. These programs are more likely to present rehabilitation and the mainstream rhythm. It also explains why many news anchors left Chinese Central Television.

WH's remarks directly pointed to the unhealthy media ecology in current Chinese society, where profit-making is emphasized over everything else. As a result, cultural productions increasingly cater to market demands. People in transitional Chinese society suffer from many types of pressure, including work, family, and interpersonal relationships. Entertainment programs provide an escape from these complicated problems. *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, on the other hand, discussed relatively serious issues, asking for more cognitive engagement in the process of consumption. If there were no entertainment elements to make audience members feel relaxed, the audience ratings could have been even worse. In an era of marketed media, cultural productions with social values are not isolated

from market demands. Although the producer and directors stated the importance of the content quality, profit seemed ranked first in the production, process and influenced how social values and norms were presented to the viewers. Although market demands and profit-making have been largely prioritized in cultural productions on the screen, state intervention is also inevitable in this authoritarian country.

**The State encoding: The state intervention.** The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) regulates media productions in China. As an executive branch of the state council of the People's Republic of China, it is known for rigorous censorship of all media productions in mainland China. The public often refers to SAPPRFT as the "head bureau." In terms of the relationship between the head bureau and *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, WH explained:

Since all of these cases are real from society, and they reflect current social issues, the censorship becomes even more stringent. Frankly speaking, over the six years, the head bureau had comprehensive and thorough oversight of this program. In my opinion, everything should be within this framework. We also have our own regulations. In general, our regulations are consistent with those of the head bureau.

The rigorous censorship of this program implies that the content on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* could not cross the line set by the head bureau. So, even though Shanghai Dragon Television is not state media, it is still under the supervision of the head bureau. WH indicated that program content needed to be aligned with the socialist values of the Party and its leadership. According to NX, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* won many local and national prizes. These organization-affiliated prizes also show the government's approval and appreciation. To win these awards, most of the social norms and values embedded in the show have to be approved and advocated by the central government.

In contrast to most mediation shows that barely touched upon sensitive topics, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* covered surprising issues like official corruption and the mistresses of government officials. Normally, these sensitive issues are rarely discussed in

detail on television. Instead, the majority of these issues appear in Xinwen Lianbo (News Simulcast) or similar hourly news programs as reports of the punishments given to government officials without explanations. Because some of these affairs are uncovered and reported by ordinary people, the public has a strong interest in the logistics of using social media to reveal sensitive information related to officials in the authoritarian regime due to the lack of transparency in the disclosure of these issues on television. In terms of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*'s coverage of widely-recognized sensitive issues, WH explained:

In fact, in a certain period, some issues are allowed by both the government and the people. Official corruption is a highly significant issue to the country and society. From this perspective, this is not sensitive at all. The cadres and leadership have pointed towards the issue. As media propaganda, it is our responsibility to do this.

This is the first time that the producer explicitly used the word “propaganda”. In building a clean and honest party, the government makes unremitting efforts to expel officials who are involved in corruption, bribery, mistresses, and extravagant life styles. In WH's understanding, official corruption and sexual misbehavior are not sensitive issues at all since it is the government's responsibility to intentionally show how it deals with these issues successfully in mainstream media to gain public confidence. WH added:

As long as you are not contradicting the principal guidance from the government, even though there are no clear instructions for handling these sensitive issues, you can still address them. But you cannot cross the line too much.

Therefore, although *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* aimed to cover controversies and conflicts regarding hot social issues, it still bore the burden of high scrutiny from the government. The program had to ensure that the content did not deviate considerably from the government's preferred interpretations of these controversial social issues. However, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* did exclude some social topics that the producer believed were not appropriate for them to broadcast, even when these topics received much attention from the public. WH said:

Some topics were never possible for *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* to address, such as the Taiwan issue and foreign policy problems. These are quite sensitive since many of them are unpredictable, such as national policies. If you have different voices at different times, they will affect the overall approach to these issues.

The producer's clarification of issues excluded from *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* reiterates the importance of the government's powerful surveillance of television production. The state and the government intentionally mark some social controversies as suitable for the public to discuss while keeping stringent control of other sensitive issues deemed unsuitable to discuss on television. The government's decision to allow some sensitive issues to be addressed on television also suggests the significance of media in influencing public opinion. Incorrect interpretations of issues and government policies on the program could possibly lead to public misunderstandings. As a result, the government would need to make extra efforts in either modifying policies or reinterpreting them for the public. The government is aware of the power of television. In terms of the extent of the government's regulation, WH specified:

For example, the second-child policy. We were very cautious in reporting on this initially. But why did we produce several related episodes later without any concerns? Because everyone knew that the state would loosen the one-child policy, and it did not harm anything to disclose some information.

The second-child policy has been one of the most widely-debated policies in Chinese society in recent years. For almost three decades, the one-child policy dominated population planning in China. With the exception of ethnic minorities and other particular exceptions, the majority of Chinese families were only allowed to have one child. With an increasingly aging population and the accompanying social problems, such as a huge gap in pensions and medical care, the central government implemented a two-child policy in some trial cities. A couple was allowed to have a second child if they were both from one-child families. On January 1, 2016, however, the one-child policy was formally phased out and replaced by the two-child policy. In other words, the central government now advocates for two children for

all families without exceptions. Since this policy is important to everyone in China, there is great public interest in learning about its details. This topic has also become a major target of rumors. WH's example of the two-child policy concretely illustrates that external pressure from the central government and the Party outweighs all other factors in the choice of topics. Television productions are still under the government's macro-control, regardless of whether they are produced by state media or commercial media.

Since the Party and the government incorporated commercial media as part of their propaganda system to publicize and disseminate preferred interpretations of social controversies, the production process of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* was supposed to present the government's view in its cultural productions. In other words, the production team of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* is assumed to have strong control over what kind of professional guests they invite, what arguments the parties and professional guests present, how they persuade the parties, and the sequence of presenting arguments. One result of this assumption was speculation about the authenticity of the parties on stage. NX explained:

No way, we never paid anything to invited guests on our show. Everything was voluntary. Only when people came from remote areas did we give them a limited subsidy.

NX partially confirmed the credibility of the guests. At least, there was no trade of information for money. This also boosted the public's confidence in the credibility of the presented information. YD also described how difficult it was to invite involved parties on stage using a specific example:

Once we dealt with the "Hu Kou (identification)" issue. We wanted to invite one woman whose children encountered this problem. However, she asked for 5000 RMB (900 USD) for her appearance. I told her that we did not pay any fees to the invited parties. Your appearance on the show would help you solve the problem, I said. She did not respond. A week later, she came back and agreed to accept the offer. But we had decided to use another guest already.

Although YD told me this story in a lot of detail, the essence of her argument was how the producer and directors helped ensure the authenticity of stories by keeping them completely separate from monetary interests. However, both the producer and directors admitted that the process was adjusted rather than being manipulated. WH described this as an element of storytelling. In order to better present the story to public viewers, the sequence of appearances and arguments are predetermined. But in terms of the what the parties say on stage, YD explained:

We could not tell the parties what arguments they should speak about. We just required authenticity in the information they presented. They could not tell a fake story. As long as the information was authentic, we did not require them to select a specific part of the story. It was really up to them.

Since there is obvious evidence of the government's influence on the production of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, I directly asked the producer and directors one question: Is there a mainstream value that orients the public thinking in this program? YD explained:

You see our slogan for this program, which aims to broadcast topics that are relevant to our transitional Chinese society. Regardless of the topics and invited guests on stage, we want to bring audience members current social problems and real issues in society.

YD actually avoided answering my question. She diverted my attention to the program's slogan. One possible explanation is that she was still a young professional on the production team, which made her cautious of answering such questions. She tried her best to sidestep giving me a clear response. Unlike YD, WH presented a more straightforward response:

You know, unlike social media, which has difficulty generating a main theme, we try our best to emphasize mainstream values on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*. Our program needs to have a central idea and thought.

WH mentioned mainstream values, or a central idea, in production. Although WH did not specify what these mainstream values were, the term "mainstream values" is widely-accepted to refer to 1) the preferred socialist readings of social issues; 2) the advocated

attitudes and solutions to social problems; and 3) the absolute confidence and trust in the government in building a harmonious society for citizens. Therefore, for each social controversy that is discussed on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, the program aims to convey a government-preferred reading to audience members. Audience members are presumed to understand and address social conflicts in similar ways to those that the program displays and advocates. The program uses preferred languages and terminology to deliver ideology and construct a consensus among the public. WH also indicated that the production team encountered a dilemma in producing the program:

Facing extremely controversial topics, we do not know what kind of viewpoints we should hold and deliver. I think the bottom line is “common sense.” We need to abide by the most basic morality and the norms of law.

Although the phrase “common sense” seems intuitive to the producer and directors, common sense is the result of constructed consensus. According to their understanding, common sense includes the obedience of morality and legal norms. While legal norms are easily defined in unambiguous terms, moral and social norms are difficult to ascertain due to their ambiguous standards. Therefore, common sense is developed in a specific cultural environment consisting of inculcated ideologies and values from the government, families, friends, and society at large. The interviewees were born and grew up in China, so their understandings of common sense have been formed through their repeated exposure to political ideology and the values instilled from indigenous Chinese cultures. This corresponds to Williams’ concept of hegemony. Hegemony is the ritualized process of cultural productions in daily practice. Interestingly, NX elaborated his argument from a critical standpoint:

I think that all television programs convey mainstream values somehow. I do not think that these mainstream values are colored with any political intention. It is not right to think of ideology when we talk about mainstream values. This way of thinking is really absurd. Mainstream values actually refer to the moral and social norms of society. Mainstream values indeed advocate love, truth, and benevolence.



NX showed his dissatisfaction with the question and argued that mainstream values should not always be tied with political ideology. In his definition, mainstream values are universal values that are concerned with love, truth, and benevolence. Even as NX attempted to detach political ideology from the concept of mainstream values, his illustration returns to the social, cultural, and moral factors that shape these values. Although a growing number of popular cultural productions attempted to be against the hegemonic process, whether they are, in fact, counter to official encoding is in question. NX's response suggested that these preferred readings of values are naturally embedded in television without any deliberate intent. Unlike fierce repression from a ruler, the public accepts hegemony when they become accustomed to cultural and ritualized productions. In general, all interviewees agreed that there were embedded government-preferred and advocated values in the program. The Party and the central government have high expectations of television's role in shaping public opinion. Therefore, I asked my interviewees about the far-reaching social significance of this program for audience members. WH firmly answered:

Yes, we definitely have a social impact. When we produce the program, we hope to deliver something that is helpful for audience members, such as improving their literacy of legal terminology. Chinese audience members have many blind spots in understanding the law. We want to inform them. In addition, they can better solve personal conflicts by applying the related legal terms we discussed. Meanwhile, some outdated perceptions need to be replaced by new ideas.

It is not difficult to discern that one of the major aims of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* is to improve audience members' knowledge of the law and to reinforce the current legal system. Legal news has always attracted audience attention (Liebman, 2010). The Party and the central government encourage media to improve the public's awareness of the law in order to promote public belief in the justice and fairness of the current legal system. Since *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* is not a court show that primarily discusses substantive and procedural law, it mainly improves the public's legal knowledge and shows

them how the law can help them resolve everyday problems. YD explained the relevancy of this program to all walks of life:

It really depends on the topic. Our program is like an encyclopedia. We touch upon housing, food safety issues, medical care, philanthropy, etc. You know, we try to present comprehensive guidance for the public.

*Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* mentioned many areas that are closely related to the daily lives of the people in China. YD's response indicated that the Party-state still exerts a powerful influence on all aspects of life. The interviewees claimed that the use of Chinese television for propagandistic purposes has not changed. Since television is still the most important source of information for the public, it remains the most highly controlled media in China (Di, 2010). The reason for the stringent control of television lies in the composition of its audience members. Chinese leaders believe that the majority of television audience members are less educated than newspaper readers and Internet users. A 2006 survey indicated that people from poor areas in China showed more reliance on television than other media sources for obtaining information (Di, 2010). The Party believes that, in order to reinforce sovereignty and maintain a harmonious society, it is necessary to minimize dissent and repress unrest in poorer demographics. This explains the government's strict regulations of cultural productions on television. YD also confirmed this assumption:

The demographic who sits in front of the television and watches our program is really limited. You know, most people will go online and watch if they want.

Therefore, the government is aware that those who are less-educated and who have a stronger reliance on television for information are more susceptible to misinformation. The government's rigorous supervision of content, even in commercial media, indicates that television at different levels, from the central to the local, must support the government and facilitate public confidence in the Party.

**The liberal encoding: Efforts to build a civil society.** Even though the producer and directors indicated the inevitable political pressure to build a harmonious society on their production, they also showed their efforts to demonstrate how to construct a civil society. A civil society can be explicated as a process in society to restrain the state's power (Brook & Frolic, 1997). In this concept, the state and society are distinguished from each other. In general, social forces consist of three components: elite classes, market autonomy, and the pressure from grassroots opinions (Brook, 1997). In the Chinese context, elite classes do not firmly challenge the sovereignty of the government and the state since state power is built by elites. Market principles influenced and transformed by capitalism, such as the marketization of the media that was explained at the beginning of this chapter, undoubtedly limit state power. Audience needs, social effects, and profits all restrict the government's intervention in media production to some extent. The last social force, public opinions, which are also called public spheres, grows exponentially online. At the production level, the producer and directors have fostered the public view of the concept of civil society by disclosing hidden information about events in order to achieve more transparency in social and political schemes. NX discussed the social influence of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*:

Television's effect is certainly taking place, but it is hard to estimate. When Chunming Wu's case was broadcast, Xia Men University instantly made a plan and punished him. Regardless of the results of his punishment, the media functions as a watchdog on these social issues. Another example is Weiwei's plastic surgery case. Weiwei did not get any compensation until our broadcast. We tried our best to help others.

NX mentioned two prominent cases in his response. The first one was about a professor's sexual harassment of female advisees. Chunming Wu was a professor in Archaeology at Xia men University, an exceptionally renowned university in Southeast China. He became notorious due to a blog written by one of his advisees about his repeated sexual harassment and misconduct. The blog became widely circulated on social media, and

numerous netizens unanimously asked for a transparent and serious punishment from Xia men University. However, for a long time, Xia men University responded to the public in a vague tone without concrete solutions. The public was very disappointed by the power and bureaucracy in the Chinese education system and their opacity in handling problems. However, all grievances from the public were swept away when *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* featured this event in an episode called “What Should We Do in the Face of Sexual Harassment?” in October 2014. It was the first time that one of the victims agreed to be interviewed and a third party witness agreed to disclose more evidence on Chunming Wu’s case. A number of mobile messages between Chunming Wu and several victims were published on the televised program. With this solid evidence, Xia men University could not defend Chunming Wu anymore. After the episode, Xia men University took immediate action, including the revocation of Chunming Wu’s teaching license, the clarification of the whole investigation process, and the disclosure of Chunming Wu’s corrupt use of research funds. It seemed that *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* significantly influenced Xia men University’s decision-making since three months had elapsed between the case’s exposure on social media and the final, satisfying solution.

Similar to Chunming Wu’s case, a girl named Weiwei encountered enormous difficulties in a lawsuit with a Korean plastic surgery hospital, where her plastic surgery operation was botched. There were instances of fraudulent conduct in these Korean hospitals, including the concealment of some of the content in the patient’s signed agreement. No specific measures were taken even though Weiwei and other victims marched in front of these hospitals in South Korea. In October 2015, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* broadcasted Weiwei’s case in an episode on “Difficulties and Solutions in International Appeals.” In that episode, expert lawyers and other public intellectuals offered supportive suggestions and feasible solutions, which helped Weiwei get substantial compensation.

The two cases NX cited, described above, suggest the media's considerable power in inciting changes in the handling of controversial social issues. Besides the traditional propagandistic role of the media, which serves the needs of the government and the Party, Chinese media also keeps struggling to build and enhance civil society towards democracy, as does Western media. The media's intervention in Chunming Wu's case significantly revealed how society questions and challenges the power of state-affiliated organizations. The public demanded transparency and a tangible outcome for this issue, and organizations could not cover up this scandal anymore. A civil society allows citizens to voice opinions that might influence political or social life outside of the state's power (Kluver & Powers, 1999). In contemporary Chinese society, media are willing to raise public awareness and promote the progress of civil society. YD provided additional examples to show how *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* helped the guests or the public at large find solutions to their problems. *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* itself seems to be a product of civil society. The production team is aware of opposing voices towards their program as well. YD explained:

Fostering audience members' critical thinking is great. We do not expect that all audience members will like our program. If the program was without any opposing opinions, it would be horrifying. You know, this kind of program only exists for... (pause and smile). We do not want to make programs that only receive praise without any criticism.

YD categorized media into two polarized groups: state-owned media and non-state-owned media. While the government and the Party have a tight grip on state-owned media as the state's organ to disseminate information for their own purposes, non-state-owned media seemed to enjoy a relatively loose and more liberal environment. In state-owned media, fostering critical thinking in audience members is not the main mission. *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* draws a clear distinction between itself and state-owned media, such as China Central Television (CCTV). YD did not mention this distinction directly, but she knew that I understood her because I was also immersed in contemporary Chinese culture. *Oriental*

*Pearl Live Newsroom* did not want to be a clone of state-owned media, which only eulogize the state and create one-sided stories. In contrast, it allowed reasonable criticism from audience members, whose ability to think critically was part of its desirable outcomes. NX stressed:

The program did not take much of a stance. Even though there were voices for the opposite side, we also let them speak out. The audience members will feel and understand those differing perspectives for themselves. Showing two-sides to every story is this program's fundamental characteristic. If there is only one-side, we do not shoot the episode.

Similar to YD, NX also distinguished *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* from programs that only featured unilateral opinions. Theoretically speaking, if an issue could not bear controversial debates among audience members, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* excluded that issue from their selection list. Showing controversial social issues from at least two angles provides audience members with relatively comprehensive information for inspecting them, resulting in subtle but progressive changes in audience members' critical thinking abilities. Previous research on the relationship between the state and society was pessimistic about the legitimacy of Chinese society outside the political regime (Brook, 1997). In an authoritarian regime, like China, a civil society is not regarded as in alliance with the state power due to the potential instability that could result from society threatening the regime's sovereignty. However, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* indicates that at least some Chinese media take responsibility for reconstructing a legitimate way for Chinese society to counterbalance the state's power via cultural productions. More contributions by the public in building a civil society are analyzed in the next chapter.

## **Discussion**

This chapter primarily addressed how Chinese dispute reality television produces and embeds social norms and values in productions. The analysis considered the encoding of cultural productions from three perspectives, including the market, the state, and society. Although the inculcation of political ideology is still paramount in the production of Chinese dispute reality television, other factors, such as market demands and the media's responsibility in promoting a civil society, inevitably affect the encoding of cultural values and social norms in the production process. With the marketization of media, Chinese dispute reality television cannot separate itself from the competitive media market, which demands that shows attract audience members and earn profits. The social values and norms that are encoded in the production are unavoidably affected by the market demands. In addition, Chinese dispute reality television is in quite a dilemma between political-ideological supervision and its enthusiasm for creating a civil society. We can see that Chinese dispute reality television not only features how the government handles social controversies, but it also presents how invited guests lead public opinion, and how the media plays a role in problem solving.

## **Self-Reflection**

This section's intention is to keep me aware of problems that I encountered in recruiting participants for interviews. I primarily started with acquaintances. This is a common strategy to break the ice and yields more contacts by snowballing techniques. In Chinese society, it is impossible to directly interview producers and directors without any interpersonal connections as a bridge. Social and interpersonal relations play vital roles in introducing new people and establishing mutual trust. I attempted to contact the program via the messaging function on Sina Weibo, but without any replies. In this circumstance,

references via acquaintances help dispel participants' suspicions and distrust. I approached interviewees via a friend, who worked for Shanghai Dragon Television before. Since my friend was a co-worker of theirs, the three interviewees were cooperative with me. One female director was close to my age, and we talked much about education in the U.S. In both the interviews and the focus groups, I presented the consent letter and asked for recording permission. My academic profession also boosted their trust and increased their sincerity in sharing their thoughts with me. Since I did not have experience in the television industry, the interviewees patiently clarified and contextualized jargon in order to help me fully understand. The individual interviews in Shanghai Dragon Television Station were conducted in one afternoon as scheduled after their business meeting.



## CHAPTER V

### STUDY 2:

#### AUDIENCE MEMBERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS CRUCIAL AGENTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Study 2 utilizes content analysis to explore audience members' attitudes towards the government, elite class and media in addressing controversial social issues. Based on the evaluative model of attitudes, I developed the codebook. The evaluative model of attitudes developed three distinct constructs that could comprehensively measure people's attitudes from a lower level of affective attitudes to a higher level of cognitive attitudes. Examining audience attitudes provides me with a general understanding of how audience members interacted with crucial agents in controversial social issues, such as the government, elite class and media. The preliminary examination of online audience comments generated substantial results regarding their affective, cognitive and behavioral attitudes. This chapter starts with a method section of content analysis, followed by the analysis of audience members' attitudes.

#### **Content analysis**

Content analysis can examine a text within its context. Content analysis includes the following components: unitizing, sampling, recording or coding, data collection, analysis of data, and reports of data (Krippendorff, 2012; Neuendorf, 2016). Therefore, I needed first to identify the unit of analysis in my research. These units are the individual comments provided by Sina Weibo users on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom's* official Sina Weibo account. Because all user comment data is traceable on Sina Weibo, accessing the data for content analysis was convenient and easy. Based on the themes that were revealed in the comments by the content analysis, I was able to examine audience members' attitudes towards the televised role of the government, the elite class, and the media.

**Sample.** In order to avoid audience members' biased opinions on particular socially controversial topics, this study included a wide range of controversial issues related to people's concerns about China's current transitional society, all of which were discussed on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*. These topics include environment, education, healthcare, and public trust in philanthropy management. The sample collection process had three steps. First, the data scraping strategy was used to collect all audience comments from February 25, 2013, to December 14, 2015, on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*'s official Sina Weibo account. The initial dataset consisted of 7000 audience members' comments on the program's 560 posts, which was based on Sina Weibo Search API. Second, this study used keywords derived from the research questions and hypotheses to seek out relevant comments from the exported dataset. These keywords include government (政府), department (部门), official (官), court (法院), guests (嘉宾), lawyer (律师) and other professionals such as professor (教授), media (媒体), journalists (记者), television (电视), and social media (微博). This step generated 1481 comments from over 7000 comments from the year 2013 to 2015. Third, this study cleaned the data by removing comments if they only included the following: 1) @ or other icons and pictures; 2) repetitive comments; or 3) attitudes towards irrelevant issues. The resulting dataset consisted of 1247 comments for analysis out of over 7000 from 2013 to 2015.

**Coding process.** To begin, two graduate students from two large universities in the Midwestern United States familiarized themselves with the data by carefully reading each comment. Both coders are native Chinese speakers with in-depth understanding of Chinese culture and social media languages. The two coders developed a codebook together, which included detailed explanations of variable dimensions and operational definitions. Both

coders used the first 10% of comments as a pre-test to check coder inter-reliability; discrepancies in coding some variables were detected. Therefore, the coders reviewed the codebook and discussed the operational definitions of disputed variables. After two rounds of discussions and modifications, the coders reached an agreement on revised operational definitions for each variable. The overall inter-coder reliability is 0.79 (Kappa value), indicating substantial agreement between coders since it is over 0.6 (Viera & Garrett, 2005).

**Comment object.** The comment object was coded into the following categories: 1) the government or its affiliated organizations and officials, when a comment contained the keyword of government (政府), department (部门), official (官), court (法院), or any combinations of these keywords; 2) the elite class, when a comment included the keyword of lawyers (律师), doctors (医生), or other professionals (e.g., 教授); 3) media, when a comment included the keyword of media (媒体), journalists (记者), television (电视), and social media (微博). For each comment, only the most salient object was coded.

**Attitudes.** Though various methods of measuring attitudes have been developed, surveying is one of the most commonly used techniques (Ajzen, 2005; Breckler; Ostrom, 1969; Schwartz & Bohner, 2001). However, surveys are problematic because the simple wording of individual questions may be insufficient for exploring attitudes and they also have the disadvantage of relying on self-reports (Albarracin, Johnson & Zanna, 2014). Therefore, this study turned to another quantitative approach, content analysis, to examine audience members' attitudes embedded in online comments. Content analysis is an appropriate approach to studying attitudes because of its systematic observations and objectivity (Burrus-Bammel, Bammel & Kopitsky, 1988).

Following the evaluative model of attitudes (Ajzen, 2007; Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Breckler, 1984; Ostrom, 1969; Schwartz & Bohner, 2001), this study drew upon previous operational definitions of affective attitudes, cognitive attitudes and behavioral attitudes (Ostrom, 1969).

**Operational definition of attitudes.** Affectively-based attitudes referred to comments containing negative or positive words that reveal audience members' emotional feelings (Ajzen, 2005; Berkowitz, 2000). Favorable and positive words include "good", "satisfied", "like", and "recommend." Unfavorable and negative words include "disappointed", "bad", "silly", and "not conscientious." However, both positive and negative words were not limited to the shortlisted words. Examples of affective statements include comments such as "The government makes me so disappointed" and "Media cannot be so shameless in this issue." Coders code "1" for positive comment, "2" for negative comment, "3" for both, and "4" for cannot tell.

Cognitively-based attitudes as comments conveying audience members' interpretations or understandings of the roles that the government, the elite class, and the media played in controversial social issues. Examples of cognitive statements include comments such as "The lawyer did not make any sense because the current policy is not like that" and "The loopholes are not only the government's responsibility." Coders code "0" for "no" if the comment does not include any words showing cognitive attitudes, and "1" for "yes" if the comment includes any words showing cognitive attitudes.

Behaviorally-based attitudes include comments in which audience members referenced their past experiences or potential future actions as they discussed the role of the government, the elite class, and the media in controversial social issues. Examples of behavioral statements include comments such as "My experience in working with government officials shows that the government is irresponsible" and "I have the same

problem, and media do not pay any attention.” Coders code “0” for “no” if the comment does not include any words showing behavioral attitudes, and “1” for “yes” if the comment includes any words showing behavioral attitudes.

In addition, this study coded “constructive suggestions” as a variable separate from cognitively-based attitudes since constructive suggestions highlight audience members’ overt anticipation of and suggestions for the comment object. Examples of constructive suggestions include comments such as “I think the government should create new policies for this issue” and “media should hold their ethical bottom line.” Coders code “0” for “no” if the comment does not include any words showing behavioral attitudes, and “1” for “yes” if the comment includes any words showing behavioral attitudes.

Finally, this study also identified knowledge sharing based on the use of @ and URLs (Rossi & Giglietto, 2016).

## **Results**

Among over 7000 comments, I extracted comments specifically concerning the role of the government, the elite class, and the media to conduct a conventional content analysis. The following sections start with a descriptive overview of the data. Then, Chi-square is employed to compare audience members’ affectively-based, cognitively-based, and behaviorally-based attitudes towards the government, the elite class, and the media.

**Overview of data.** Of the 1247 comments that included the keywords of the government, the elite class, and the media, 56.7% of comments concentrated on the role of media, 20.4% of comments were concerned about the televised role of the elite class, and only 12.9% of comments included discussions of the government.

**Affectively-based attitudes.** Audience members principally expressed their emotional feelings most of the time. Of the 1247 comments, 1069 (85.7%) comments obviously showed either positive or negative valence. The following data in Table 2

suggested that an overwhelming number of affectively-based attitudes were salient to negative feelings. A Chi-square test was used to detect the relationship between the objects of the comments and affective attitudes. The results demonstrated that affectively-based attitudes significantly differed on the role of the government, the elite class, and the media ( $\chi^2 = 1087.95$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Examples of affectively-based comments are: 1) No. 163, “I was so disappointed by the media since they did not dig everything out”; 2) No. 317, “I was so disgusted by what the government did”; 3) No. 438, “the law professor was so pathetic to say this”. Media aside, audience members were more likely to target the elite class than to express affective attitudes towards the government.

Table 2. Percentages of Affectively-based Comments

	Affectively-based comments		Total %(n)
	Positive	Negative	
Government	7.8%	14.8%	13.4%
Elite class	13.5	23.6	21.9
Media	71.3	54.7	57.4
Other	7.4	6.9	7.3
Total %(n)	100.0(178)	100.0(890)	100.0(1069)

Note:  $\chi^2 = 1087.95$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Cognitively-based attitudes.** In total, 808 of the 1247 comments (64.3%) included cognitively-based attitudes. A Chi-square test indicated that cognitively-based attitudes in audience members’ comments significantly differed with regards to the televised role of the government, the elite class, and the media ( $\chi^2 = 56.476$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Audience members showed the most cognitive attitudes towards media (54.9%). The elite class

(23.0%) ranked second, and the televised role of the government (15.8%) ranked last. Examples of cognitively-based comments concerning the role of the government or the elite class in controversial social issues are: 1) No. 962, “media should shoulder more social responsibility in knowledge building for the public”; 2) No. 1021, “the government was never responsive to people’s requests, and they did not seriously take people’s difficulties into account”; 3) No. 677, “these professionals were never on the same level with ordinary people, and they always held the moral high ground”; and 4) No. 692, “the education department did not implement their slogans into practice, and they were corrupted with allocated funding.”

Table 3. Percentages of Cognitively-based Comments

	Cognitively-based comments		Total
	Yes	No	
Government	15.8%	7.5%	12.9%
Elite class	23.0	15.7	20.4
Media	54.9	59.9	56.7
Other	6.3	16.9	10.0
Total	100.0 (808)	100.0 (439)	100.0 (1247)

Note:  $\chi^2 = 56.476$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Behaviorally-based attitudes.** In total, only 236 of the 1247 comments (18.9%) included behaviorally-based attitudes. A Chi-square test indicated that behavioral attitudes in audience members’ comments significantly differed with regards to the televised role of the government, the elite class, and the media ( $\chi^2 = 10.57$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .1$ ). Compared with affectively-based and cognitively-based attitudes in audience members’ online comments,

there was not a strong statistical difference among the government, the elite class, and the media. Examples of behaviorally-based comments concerning the role of the government or the elite class in controversial social issues are: 1) No. 65, “you know how difficult it is to communicate with government officials in China? Do not even think about giving them suggestions, and I will never make this successful”; and 2) No. 656, “Chinese doctors were not conscientious, and they only thought about self-interest. I was once asked to buy expensive medicine, but I did not do so.”

Table 4. Percentages of Behaviorally-based Comments

	Behaviorally-based comments		Total
	Yes	No	
Government	14.4%	12.6%	12.9%
Elite class	14.8	21.8	20.4
Media	56.4	56.7	56.7
Other	14.4	8.9	10.0
Total	100.0 (236)	100.0 (1011)	100.0 (1247)

Note:  $\chi^2 = 10.57$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .1$

**Constructive suggestions.** In total, 150 of the 1247 comments (12.0%) included constructive suggestions. A Chi-square test indicated that constructive suggestions in audience members’ comments significantly differ with regards to the televised role of the government, the elite class, and the media ( $\chi^2 = 39.65$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Constructive suggestions mostly targeted the media (44.7%), followed by the government (28.6%), and finally the elite class (15.3%). Besides recognizing the roles of the government, the elite class, and the media, audience members also actively offered constructive suggestions



towards these comment objects to some extent. Examples of constructive suggestions concerning the role of the government or the elite class in controversial social issues are: 1) No. 55, “the government should adopt a digital office, and digital files are easy to save for future interrogation”; and 2) No. 319, “those experts should go to the grassroots level and experience their lives, then they might not use the current standard to judge others.”

Table 5. Percentages of Constructive Suggestions

	Constructive suggestions		Total
	Yes	No	
Government	28.6%	10.8%	12.9%
Elite class	15.3	21.1	20.4
Media	44.7	58.3	56.7
Other	11.4	9.8	10.0
Total	100.0 (150)	100.0 (1097)	100.0 (1247)

Note:  $\chi^2 = 39.65$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$

### Discussions of audience attitudes

In authoritarian states, such as China, where media function as the state apparatus in shaping positive images of the government and modeling public thoughts and actions, the televised roles of the government, the elite class, and the media are valuable to investigate. Since television is still the primary source of information for the majority of Chinese citizens (Xu, 2000), audience members’ attitudes extensively reflect the general public’s attitudes, which are also influenced by mass media coverage regarding how the government, the elite class, and the media play a role in interpreting and addressing controversial social issues.

First, the results indicate that most audience members show negative rather than positive attitudes towards the televised roles of the government, the elite class, and the media. Although negative comments are not uncommon on, and even dominate, social media platforms (Zhou & Moy, 2007), audience members' negative attitudes on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom's* official Sina Weibo account are not irrational. The majority of negative comments specifically target comment objects. A number of affectively-based comments suggest the media's bias and partiality in reporting on and broadcasting controversial social issues, disappointment towards the government, and dissatisfaction with the elite class's moral high ground. The results also show noticeable behaviorally-based attitudes towards the government and the elite class. With reference to personal experiences, audience members incorporate bigger social problems into their daily, mundane talk. Some audience members also find the program's official Sina Weibo account to be an appropriate place to voice their concerns via their personal experiences in order to publically reveal their problems.

Although affectively-based and behaviorally-based attitudes are more likely inherent to individual surroundings and living experiences (Ostrom, 1969), they still offer significant insights into patterns of audience members' online participation. The overwhelming number of negative comments reflect audience members' dissatisfaction with and distrust in the malfunction of the government, the elite class, and the media in dealing with controversial social issues. When transitional societies face controversial social issues, both the public and the state are confused because they are unsure of the best way to sustain a stable society. As long as there is no potential to destabilize society, dissent is allowed on social media (King, Pan & Roberts, 2013). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand the existence of audience members' negative attitudes towards the government, the elite class, and the media.

In addition, this analysis reveals that audience members' comments significantly contribute to the cognitive recognition of the televised roles of the government and the elite

class. Audience members' cognitively-based attitudes focused on the government's unresponsiveness to people's requests, the media's lack of social responsibility and role as a watchdog, privileges of the elite class, and distrust in government officials. Yang (2009) argued that the commencement of the Internet and the rise of social media would reduce the influence of traditional mass media on viewers, and the public would be empowered to express their individualistic opinions on social media. Within the mass media frame, audience members' cognitively-based attitudes are better contextualized. *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* integrates social news and multidimensional discussions of these social controversies. Labeled as not only a solution-oriented program, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* intends to provide audience members with open interpretations of the roles of the government, the elite class, and the media in dealing with issues concerning people's lives in current Chinese society, such as education, fertility welfare, social services, and the environment.

However, a glance over the comments concerning audience members' cognitively-based attitudes indicate that there is a strongly-preferred interpretation of controversial social issues from the government and the elite class on television. Audience members are aware of the preferred interpretations on mass media, and they rebut the embellishment of the government and the elite class on social media. Despite ample evidence of intensive censorship and control over social media content (Wang, 2013; Zhao, 2000; Zhao, 2008), posting opinions concerning political and social issues online is still vibrant in Chinese society. Mass media frames of the government and the elite class, in fact, provide many talking points for audience members and further trigger their deliberative discourse challenging the televised roles of the government and elite class on Sina Weibo.

I also examined constructive suggestions, which constituted only 150 (12%) of 1247 comments. Constructive suggestions included the improvement of government officials'

efficiency and the revision of policies. However, the relatively low number of constructive suggestions indicated that audience members were more likely to identify the roles of the government, the elite class, and the media in controversial social issues rather than to advocate feasible and useful suggestions for solutions. Since the state power is enormous, audience members could feel that their suggestions would be useless. Suggestions from grassroots are easily ignored in an authoritarian regime. However, from my perspective, audience members' reluctance to post constructive suggestions is most likely due to their lack of relevant knowledge. Audience members are capable of understanding controversial social issues and complain about the government, the elite class, and the media in tackling these issues. But their ability to propose constructive feedback is difficult. This inability results from two possible causes: 1) audience members are not experts in these domains, and they are not equipped with professional knowledge; 2) low government responsiveness prevents audience members from suggesting constructive feedback. The institutionalization and bureaucracy of the Chinese government and relevant organizations make the implementation of any new policies extremely difficult and complicated. The public does not feel encouraged to propose suggestions for the government.

In addition to major findings on audience members' attitudes towards the televised role of the government, the elite class, and the media, this study also found that 437 (35%) of the 1247 comments engaged in information sharing by using “@reply” (@sign and Sina Weibo user name) or including URLs. Due to the development of social media technologies, online information sharing enables audience members to spread their opinions exponentially in an accessible way. Similar to the convention of “@reply” (@sign and the user name) on Twitter, audience members can choose specific users to read their comments. But their comments are also available to the public on Sina Weibo. Honeycutt and Herring (2009) argued that the application of the @sign with a reference to a specific user largely enhances

conversations on Twitter. The @ sign also helps users track previous conversations. Therefore, it was obvious that active interactions took place on Sina Weibo. Audience members engaged with other audience members in discussing the televised role of the government, the elite class, and the media on Sina Weibo.

Protests for social change and other overt social activism are not the exclusive categories for showing the public's deliberative thoughts and progress towards a civil society. Shirk (2011) argued that "the potential of social media lies mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere—change measured in years and decades rather than in weeks or months" (p. 29). Audience members' attitudes towards the televised roles of the government, the elite class, and the media in controversial social issues might not instantly call for potential actions from the grassroots. However, their attitudes, especially cognitively-based attitudes, and constructive suggestions progressively pave the way to build a transitional society consisting of pluralistic and legitimate public opinions.

## CHAPTER VI

### STUDY 3:

#### AUDIENCE CITIZENSHIP IN CONTROVERSIAL SOCIAL ISSUES

Given that my previous quantitative analysis indicated that audience members expressed cognitive attitudes with constructive suggestions, I would like to seek more nuanced interpretations of their decoding of televised media, the government, and the elite social class in addressing controversial social issues. Study 3 adopts a thematic analysis to examine contextualized online audience comments. Based on the theoretical framework of Hall's decoding of opposite and negotiated codes, I can explore audience polysemic interpretations of controversial social issues and crucial agents, such as the government, elite class and media in addressing controversial social issues within the cultural and social context. In general, audience members' interpretations exercise audience citizenship in checking the legitimacy of authorities, and inquiring the accountability of social affiliations. This counterbalancing power from audience members provides a confirmatory development of public spheres on Chinese social media. The first part of this chapter is an overview of the thematic analysis, followed by the developed themes from online audience members' comments indicating the public spheres on Sina Weibo.

#### **Thematic analysis**

In order to examine regular audience members' responses to Chinese dispute reality television, a thematic analysis of their comments on Sina Weibo is an effective and practical approach. Thematic analyses require interpretations from the researcher since themes and patterns are developed using both explicit and implicit data (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). According to the definition, thematic analysis "is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). As noted above, the thematic analysis guided me to focus on meaningful themes and patterns with respect to

specific research questions. Since my primary concerns were to explore how people feel, think, and express within a specific context, a thematic analysis allowed me to understand the meanings of people's lived experiences and perceived social reality (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012; Schutz, 1962). I developed themes not only based on superficial semantic meanings, but also on underlying ideas and conceptualizations of data. I did not isolate phrases or sentences that were likely to be meaningless. Instead, a close examination of similar messages gathered together is the key to developing a pattern or a theme. The viewer's comments are scattered across many posts on the *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom's* official Sina Weibo page. Although the social controversies vary in each episode and audience members' comments seem widely disparate with regard to specific topics, detectable themes still emerged when looking at the essence and deeper meanings of these comments. It is also assumed that key themes can provide valuable feedback for producers in order to better understand their audience and learn how to improve future productions. Bruns (2011b) claimed that a thematic analysis of viewers' online comments was more authentic than artificial interviews. Combined with traditional approaches to investigating viewers, such as focus groups and interviews, a thematic analysis can enhance researchers' understanding of audiences in the converged media environment (Simons, 2011).

Since a thematic analysis is flexible, it is important to clarify a rigorous process for its use. As a qualitative researcher, it is particularly important for me to acknowledge the theoretical position that is relevant to the themes I develop (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One obvious potential pitfall of thematic analysis is presenting anecdotes rather than systematically analyzing data (Bryman, 1988). Therefore, I frequently reminded myself to be consistent in coding the entire data set and in collecting data relevant to each code with regard to my research questions. To do so, I read through the complete data set, which consisted of 3386 comments on the program's official Weibo site for the year 2015. The

following table, Table 6, displays topics that were broadcasted in 2015. Table 6 clearly indicates that several episodes are excluded from my analysis since the topics of these episodes were either the promotion of other entertainment-oriented reality television shows or featured celebrities with no reference to controversial social issues. It is necessary to note that on April 15, 2015, two topics were covered on the air, so discussions on Sina Weibo were divided between these two topics. The last episode was scheduled to be broadcast on December 21, 2015, but it did not air on television. Therefore, there were not comments on that episode. Table 6 also displays the number of existing comments and the number of coded comments under each post throughout 2015.

Table 6. The List of Topics on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* in 2015

Topics	Dates	Remarks	The number of existing comments	The number of coded comments
Broadcasted suicide online	01/05/15		43	35
The most intimate harm—divorce and its effect on children	01/19/15		422	24
AIDS and how it should be treated in society	01/27/15		109	9
The crisis of trust due to the selfie in the operating room	02/02/15		39	22
Beauty contests and matchmaking for the wealthy	02/09/15		31	8
A retrospective of 2014	02/16/15		21	0
A horrendous fraud—Pyramid schemes (Ponzi schemes)	03/02/15		45	18
Redress wrongful convictions and how prisoners adapt to society	03/09/15		6	3



Table 6 —continued

Grassroots celebrities and their prominence	03/16/15		102	9
Pension fraud	03/23/15		28	5
House demolition and compensation	03/30/15		25	8
The location of landfills and health threats/	04/06/15	Two topics	48	18
Mistresses of governmental officials			168	55
The negligence of ambulances	04/20/15		24	12
Overseas purchasing	05/11/15		39	13
The credentials of the master of Fengshui (Geomancy)	05/18/15		42	15
The contradiction between doctors and patients	05/25/15		276	26
Orphan adoption and the essence of wealth accumulation	06/01/15		111	12
Publicity film on breast feeding and its social reaction	06/07/15		116	7
A good school zone and parents sacrifice at all costs	06/15/15		52	20
Travel and personal safety	06/22/15		50	8
Promotion of an entertainment-oriented reality television show	06/29/15	Excluded from analysis	8	0
Paparazzi and the privacy of celebrities	07/06/15		67	10
School violence and bullying	07/13/15		119	15
A special episode featuring celebrities from another reality television show	07/20/15	Excluded from analysis	270	0
Pre-marital childbearing and related policies	07/27/15		286	24

Table 6 —continued

Sexual harassment of left-behind children	08/03/15		46	28
A special post from <i>Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom</i> in response to audience members' reproaches	08/04/15	Responses from the program	62	0
The contradiction between doctors and patients, and the responsibility of doctors	08/10/15		7	2
Philanthropy and management of fundraising	08/17/15		14	8
Fairness request on campus and in society	08/24/15		227	43
Anti-Japanese TV series and the logic of scriptwriters	09/07/15		5	4
Food safety	09/14/15		72	12
Disputes on test-tube babies	09/21/15		46	7
Who can certify me? Social scheme on trust	09/28/15		90	5
Promotion for <i>Limit Challenge</i> —an entertainment-oriented reality television program	09/30/15	Excluded from analysis	7	0
Left-behind old people	10/12/15		33	4
Special education and acclimation to normal society	10/19/15		7	12
Maintaining rights for Chinese customers in Korea with failed plastic surgery	10/26/15		35	10
Didi and Uber development in China	10/30/15		13	5
Unexpected infants and parents' unwillingness to take responsibility	11/09/15		12	1

Table 6 —continued

Fake information in raising public funds	11/16/15		61	12
The man’s head transplant and confidence in medical science	11/23/15		31	6
Cadre lifestyle and corruption problem	11/29/15		14	1
Pyramid scheme	12/07/15		13	7
Elevator safety	12/14/15		4	2
Internet female anchor	12/21/15	Not broadcast on television	5	2
Total	NA	NA	3386	559

I developed themes based on my coding. When developing themes, I employed tables to visually represent the themes and their relationships to the corresponding codes. I wrote a detailed and logical analysis with sufficient evidence from the data extracts to validate the prevalence of the theme. Although this coding process employed a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach, it still provides an overview of how the online audience decodes dispute reality television shows in a variety of ways. Since the coding process was done by me without any validation from another coder, I was aware of my personal values, thoughts, and feelings when coding (Boyatzis, 1988).

Coding in qualitative research depends upon the angle from which the researcher views the phenomenon (Saldaña, 2015). Therefore, there is no precise coding; it is an interpretive act even for different coders regarding the same case. A pattern emerges when consistent and repetitive data occurs more than twice (Saldaña, 2015). A pattern presupposes “a multiplicity of elements gathered into the unity of a particular agreement” (Stenner, 2014, p.136). Patterns provide me more comprehensive and tractable perspectives for

understanding how audience members decode social values and cultural connotations in their daily lives. Patterns can be reliable as evidence because they represent the salience and importance of concrete social meanings in people's life (Saldaña, 2015). In the process of data collection and pattern development, I read audience members' comments across an entire year, from the first episode in 2010 to the last episode in 2015, instead of randomly selecting comments. Doing so allowed the patterns to be generated in a more systematic way. There is a convenient timeline axis on the official Sina Weibo page of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* that chronologically display the first Weibo tweet on October 15, 2010 to the most recent one on December 21, 2015. Therefore, reaching audience members' comments was not difficult for me. Since reading the text is a fundamental step in analyzing data (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012), I thoroughly read all audience members' comments for the selected timeframe. Qualitative data collection is different from a quantitative approach, which would be more inclined to have an arbitrary cut-off.

After ensuring the richness and depth of my data, I abided by the protocol of saturation and commonality of data collection (Berg & Lune, 2012; Lindolf & Taylor, 2011; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). For me, the saturation of data meant that no more information could further contribute to the patterns I developed from coding. Since I coded comments under each official post in 2015, I applied the saturation protocol of coding to every post. Some posts satisfied saturation in fewer than ten comments while others needed more. Therefore, there is no arbitrary number of coded comments under each post. In the end, I generated 559 comments. Although the number of comments seems too large for qualitative research, it is still manageable since most of the comments are concise, with only 1 to 2 sentences. Thus, I read and archived data until saturation occurred, and I analyzed them in order to identify emerging themes. Although audience members' comments dating back to 2010 are archived on Sina Weibo, I could not manually analyze all of them into

details since the data is too large to be manageable. In addition, reading comments from 2015 alone already generated sufficient themes. Some episodes elicited more comments than others due to the nature of the public's interest.

I principally examined original comments provided by audience members rather than including interactions among the members. However, I did include the interactions between audience members and the program. In order to conveniently code online comments, I copied and pasted them into an excel spreadsheet. However, I only exported comments for my data analysis based on the principles of saturation and commonality of data. When I read these comments, I jotted down ideas and explored potential coding patterns. As the analysis proceeded, themes emerged based on textual analysis instead of content analysis or exploratory factor analysis in quantitative approaches. In the project, the unit of analysis was audience members' understanding of and interactions with the program. The unit of coding was each comment on the program's official Sina Weibo account.

## **Results**

A thorough thematic analysis of audience members' online comments yielded five categories of public spheres associated with the roles the media, the government and the elite class play in controversial social issues and dispute resolution: 1) the government is the core, 2) the request for rule of law, 3) the media is a paradox, 4) the elite class is not the boss, and 5) the grass is always greener (adoration of foreign countries). In terms of deliberative democracy, the citizens' aspirations and contributions to public issues have been accepted as crucial elements of public discourse (Jacobs, Cook & Carpini, 2009). Public participation in social and political issues are relatively difficult to identify due to the lack of adequate institutional venues (Zheng & Pan, 2016). The categorized public spheres here indicate the discursive public constructions of cultural norms and social values that are built into the production of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*.

These public spheres challenge the legitimacy of cultural productions in mainstream media and potentially destabilize the power and authority of the media, the government, and the elite class. Although China has long been labeled as despotic, public spheres that are generated by online audience members show significant and promising citizenship activity in counterbalancing the power of the government and the Party (Yang, 2009). Beyond the Chinese context, citizens in most countries hold high expectations for government accountability. In order to maintain the political system and social stability, the Chinese government and the CCP make unremitting efforts to develop feasible solutions to all-facets of social problems. The interviews with the producer and directors of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* suggest that the program mainly portrays the government as an amenable solution-provider. However, public discourse on its official Sina Weibo account reflect insights that deviate from the portrayals of the government in mainstream media.

**The government is the core.** The most salient theme in audience members' online comments is concentrated on governmental responsiveness and accountability. The majority of online audience comments complain about the dereliction of the government. The local government is sometimes named when audience members mention their personal grievances and stories, but most comments do not specify the government at either a central or a local level. Although the program frames the government and the Party as positive initiators in resolving controversial social issues, audience members still feel disappointed with the government. In one episode on the topic of pyramid schemes, one comment criticized the absence of governmental regulations, assuming an undisclosed relationship between the government and pyramid schemes. Audience criticism of the government is highly related to issues that are relevant to personal grievances, such as medical misconduct, food safety, demolition and housing, the compulsory education system, etc. All these issues require extensive intervention and regulation from the government.

For instance, in terms of medical misconduct, audience members' comments show that they relate hospital malpractice to the negligence of government supervision. Intuitively, all hospital resources should be used to prioritize lifesaving before moneymaking. Surprisingly, though, the relationship is not so straightforward. Instead, countless complaints were leveled at the irresponsibility of hospitals, doctors, and medical policies. This trend is also reflected on the official Sina Weibo account of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*. One commenter stated:

Cannot believe that there is a black market for ambulances. How do these unlicensed ambulances work? The hospital is so unethical. The government must be complicit in this shady business. The government should reintegrate first-aid resources instead of using hospitals and doctors as scapegoats.

Traditional Chinese medical ethics are derived from Confucianism. Regardless of the outcomes of medical operations, doctors should have compassion as human beings (Qiu, 1993). However, this altruistic principle has changed with the marketization and privatization of hospital resources. Since the CCP took social control over medical practice (Qiu, 1993), it became common sense for the government and the Party to regulate and integrate hospital resources. Audience comments indicate a strong desire for the government to exert careful supervision over the management of medical resources. In some cases, contentious relationships between doctors and patients have become extremely fierce, which decreased the public's perception of medicine as a sacred profession, resulting in personal grievances and petitions. In addition, personal grievances and petitions could potentially destabilize society, which is not what the government expects. Audience comments on several episodes featuring the tension between doctors and patients broadcasted on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* overwhelmingly criticized the lack of ethics in doctors' medical practice and the lack of governmental control and regulations. One comment indicated:

The hospital did not do what it should have done. However, we should not push all responsibility onto the doctor, who was regarded as the wrongdoer. The government should take major responsibility as well. Why does the

government leave hospitals out of control? Where is the government's accountability?

This comment indicated that audience members expected the government to play a high intervention role in regulating hospitals and doctors' codes of conduct. In the hostile relationship between doctors and patients, the government is the most essential player in determining how the relationship can be reconciled. Similarly, in another episode concerning food safety in current Chinese society, audience members showed distrust in the authorities and a strong desire for governmental supervision. One comment suggested:

Government-affiliated organizations, such as the industrial and commercial administrations, need to figure out how to curb fake and hazardous products in the food market. Although there are warm-hearted, unprofessional people, who actively participate in the fight against shoddy products, the government should bear the most responsibility in guaranteeing food safety.

Regardless of the specific controversial social issue, these representative comments suggested audience members' recognition of and reliance on the governmental responsiveness in addressing controversial social issues, even if their proposed solutions are not convincing for the public at large. Yang et al. (2013) highlighted the role of the Internet in raising "an awareness of the government's improper or incompetent handling of sociopolitical issues" (p. 22). As a populist authoritarian regime, where direct political participation between the government and ordinary people is advocated, the role of the government is crucial in China (Tang, 2016). In a populist society, the functions of institutions are weak and ordinary citizens frequently rely on the government to be a problem solver. This finding also corresponds to the concept of state-led civil society in China (Brook, 1997). In the Chinese context, the state has been an active factor in promoting the formulation of civil society. So, positioning the state and society dichotomously is not applicable in the Chinese context. These cognitive and deliberative audience comments suggest that the public intuitively connects improvements in society to the power of the



government. Although these expressions of grievances hardly lead to direct social activism, such as collective action, which is severely restricted by Chinese censorship (King, Pan & Robert, 2013), the public interest can still promote an awareness of the importance of public authority in political and social stability.

**Request for the rule of law.** Along with audience members' requests for governmental responsiveness and accountability, online comments also show a strong urge for the rule of law. Throughout all the controversial social issues that are presented on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, a noteworthy trend in online comments is the discussion and appeal for rule of law in contemporary Chinese society. Consistent legal reforms have been advocated since the late 1970s underscoring the transparency and procedure of justice (Chen, 2012; Fu & Cullen, 2011). The Supreme People's Court emphasized procedural law over other approaches, such as mediation. In contrast to mediations, which focus on the power of mediators and interpersonal relationships, the rule of law highlights transparency and fairness in legal decision-making. The rule of law is also a crucial sign of a civil society, where the state power is limited. However, in the settlement of controversial social issues, a lack of the rule of law has been a very obvious deficiency in current Chinese society. One such comment regarding the issue of demolition and housing identified this:

Reality is always distanced from the rule of law. If we can really abide by the rule of law, people's benefits will be maximized. Using violence in demolition is illegal, but it seems that there is no corresponding punishment for these mobs at all. Where is the law? How can ordinary people's rights be protected?

This comment pointed towards the fast-growing social changes in the majority of Chinese cities, which involve the demolition and reconstruction of old cities. With rapid economic development and urbanization, a significant number of cities are passionate about the reconstruction and renovation of old housing. On one hand, reconstruction can improve the living conditions for people and the public image of cities. On the other hand,

reconstruction is also a lucrative opportunity for real estate companies to make money quickly. One big obstacle in demolition is reaching a mutual and reciprocal agreement between property developers and current residents. If residents are satisfied with the compensation provided by property developers, the demolition process should proceed smoothly according to rules and regulations. However, as in many real cases, disputes often arise between real estate companies and residents. Either residents are not happy with the reimbursement provided by the developers or the developers do not fulfill their promises after demolition. As a result, conflicts rise and some developers brutally demolished houses without negotiating with residents at all. Unsurprisingly, these developers disobeyed the law. What is surprising, though, is that these reprehensible actions are covered up by state authorities and the developers do not face the consequences of their illegal activities. On the topic of medical disputes, two comments stated:

The two parties just argued with each other for their individual benefits. But the law is supposed to be supported by substantial evidence instead of aimless arguments and abuse. The local court is also unreliable. The lawyer for the doctor is too selfish. The evidence and attitudes are so skeptical.

Although the program leaned towards trusting doctors to alleviate lousy relationships between doctors and patients, it forgot that the wrongdoer should be punished. It is common sense to hold someone criminally liable if it is a criminal case. Why is there something called “tolerance” for this? If everything can be tolerated, what is the purpose of the law?

From these representative comments, we can observe that the rule of law is difficult to implement in Chinese society, where social factors and morality play indispensable roles. Although scholars still believe that Chinese legal reform towards the rule of law is ongoing (Chen, 2012), most scholars also think that the legal and judicial systems in China have been distanced from the rule of law (Fu & Cullen, 2011; Gallagher & Wang, 2011; Liebman, 2011). Compared with the rule of law, mediations have been widely used in Chinese dispute resolution, focusing on the power of mediators in negotiations. The rule of law, on the other

hand, requires transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness in dispute resolution. It is surprising to observe that on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, all the experts and the host made unremitting efforts to help the guests achieve mutual agreements via mediation while online audience members demanded fairness in justice and the legitimacy of law and were unwilling to sacrifice individual rights to reach an agreement. Another comment on the topic of school bullying suggested the following:

I recommend revising laws related to juvenile delinquency. The media tried to acquit these young criminals of crimes. However, this was neither right nor beneficial for these juveniles in the long term. This indulgence, in fact, gives young adults reasons to commit crimes. Legal punishment related to young criminals should be enforced fairly and transparently.

The audience member's comment indicated the power of the media in influencing judicial independence. Liebman (2005) proposed a concept called "popularizing law." Although popularizing law can disseminate legal knowledge and educate the public, its major role is in influencing court decisions. Although Chinese courts need to meet the populist pressure to make decisions that correspond to popular perceptions of right and wrong, the media can take advantage of morality in affecting legal procedures and final outcomes (Liebman, 2005). Media can use their authority to exert pressure on dispute resolutions (Liebman, 2005). Since legal terms in China are vague, the media takes the populist approach to win public trust in interpreting law, further affecting the judicial system. It is the media's responsibility to cover social issues, but intervening in and putting pressure on the judicial system is beyond its scope and apparently threatens the development of the rule of law in Chinese society. The media tried to convince invited guests to make reconciliations rather than resorting to law and adjudication. Another comment also substantiated the power of the media in affecting judicial outcomes:

The episode broadcasted on August 3rd, which discussed school bullying in Wuqi (a rural area in China), could mislead public opinion in some ways. I was afraid that public opinion would influence the second trial of this case,

resulting in an effect on the final outcome. The justice of the law should be separated from all other influential factors. If the law is hijacked by public opinion and media, where is the so-called justice?

The analysis of the interviews with the producer and directors of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* indicated that they emphasize delivering a preferred interpretation of how controversial social issues can be resolved in order to reinforce a harmonious society. In their approach to building harmony, mediation seems superior to the rule of law. Mediation was once a frequent strategy in courts, but the scope of mediation was beyond the court to a large extent (Pissler, 2013). The public participated in the mediation process, jeopardizing the autonomy of the law and the court in decision-making (Gallagher & Wang, 2011). People that had litigation experience showed less trust and confidence in the transparency and fairness of China's legal system (Gallagher & Wang, 2011). Audience comments reflect that the media have overstepped their boundaries and used their position to justify the populist law rather than the rule of law. Although mediations are necessary in building a harmonious society based on Confucianism, at this stage, Chinese citizens are more eager to increase the rule of law in addressing controversial social issues.

Since these controversial social issues are framed by the mainstream media, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, it is not surprising that countless comments pointed to the role of the media in conveying, understanding, and influencing social and political issues at large. Contrary to the overwhelming disappointment towards the government, online audience comments are dichotomous towards the media, either believing it to be reliable or unreliable. Perceptions of media credibility can be influenced by three factors: channel, source, and message (Kiousis, 2001; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus & McCann, 2003). Since the channel of Dragon television and the source of controversial social issues are rarely questioned by audience members, most of the audience comments discussed the credibility

of the message. The following theme suggests audience members' recognition and interpretation of the role of media in reflecting controversial social issues.

**Media is a paradox.** In the interviews with the producer and directors of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, they more or less agreed that the program was politicalized to some extent since it advocated preferred social values, which were beneficial for building a stable regime and harmonious society. Some audience members accepted and supported preferred readings from the mainstream media. For instance, one comment about the discussion on suicide stated:

*Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* offers the right guidance for public opinion. Confronting the moral dilemmas in controversial social issues, the program leads the public to serious thinking. We should say no to internet bullying, which is an accomplice of those who commit suicide. The program helps people understand that mental illness is not shameful and professional consulting is necessary.

Mental health has been a major concern in contemporary Chinese society. Life and work stress have forced young people to experience a lot of pressure. In China, almost 6% of people have depression and anxiety, which are the most common mental problems among working laborers (Johnson, 2016). However, patients often feel ashamed of their mental illnesses and are reluctant to receive mental health treatment. Suicide can occur as a result. The audience comments indicated that the program encouraged the public to face mental illness and seek professional help while alleviating the high levels of stigma. Along with this proposal, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* also advocated for the public, especially netizens, to help the mentally ill look at the world around them in a positive way. Another comment on the topic of child adoption schemes said that the topic choice was excellent and thought-provoking. Most positive comments about the program commended its choice of topics and conveyed interpretations. From this standpoint, the role of the mainstream media in information dissemination is still pivotal and recognized. Audience members also rely on the

mainstream media to obtain information. It is apparent that *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* provides audience members with a valuable platform for understanding controversial social issues and how these issues can be resolved.

However, the majority of comments complained about the program and the media at large. A number of audience members' comments identified the media's role in disseminating politically and socially-preferred messages instead of simply engaging in information sharing. In general, the criticism focused on media credibility and social responsibility. It was unexpected that fewer comments questioned the truth of these controversial social issues. For those online audience members, the authenticity of the controversial issues was out of question. Gronke and Cook (2007) identified an "identification gap", stating that the public showed accelerating distrust and disbelief in news media. The Pew Research Center (2005) also showed longitudinal data that trust in the media, compared to trust in other institutions, plummeted from the 1970's to the present. This also applied to the Chinese context. But, as this project shows, the doubt in the media's credibility stemmed from the audience's increasing awareness of the media's profitability and its strong affiliation with the government and the CCP. Audience members showed their skepticism of mediated messages from the mainstream media. Audience members perceived that *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* lacked pluralistic viewpoints, and it only supported the arguments that aligned with the government. One comment on food safety said:

The program has lost its moral bottom-line. It is only for audience ratings and the Party. It seems that the program did not blame governmental organizations at all. Food safety should be their problem, so do not defend them.

The producer and directors of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* admitted that making a profit was a primary goal in production since the media market is very competitive. Some audience members are aware of this. When experts and the host spoke to non-vulnerable

guests on stage, audience members were skeptical of the relationship between the media and these relatively powerful people. In a civil society, people would like to see the media take a more impartial role in society. In democratic countries, the media functions as a watchdog to a large extent. So, in the pursuit of a Chinese civil society, the public yearns for an unbiased media with credibility. Another comment on illegal ambulances said:

The program should not stay on the surface. Is *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* reluctant or afraid of digging up more details and looking into issues in depth?

Therefore, the media are expected to play an investigative and objective role in revealing such controversial social issues. Compared to the credibility of the media, many audience comments showed their desire for the media to take on more social responsibility in resolving controversial social issues. Chinese media are expected to fulfill many social expectations, such as problem-solving. Since ordinary citizens in a populist regime cannot find an official way to voice their worries and have their problems resolved, the media has become an appropriate and accessible way of doing so. One comment on water pollution said:

The program is incomplete; where is the solution? The program indeed comes up with a controversial social issue, but where is the concrete solution plan? The program only reveals a phenomenon. If you cannot give a real and feasible plan, what's the point of your program?

It is obvious that audience members ask for specific and explicit solutions to problems. Similar comments are not scarce, hanging hope on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* to resolve social issues. In this sense, the media are expected to present targeted solutions rather than merely discussing controversial social issues. The media is the gateway for the public to obtain information, and audience members hope that the content is trustworthy. Transparent processes and substantial results are both crucial characteristics of trustworthiness. For *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, audience members seek a transparent process showing how the program handles controversial social issues. In addition, audience

members are more interested in the substantial results that the program could offer. If the episode ends without a definite answer, audience members feel distrust of the program.

In terms of trustworthiness, what experts say on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* also matters. Since experts have specialized knowledge of their specific professions, they are regarded as the elite class. The positions and attitudes of the elite class towards controversial social issues are also talking points on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*'s official Sina Weibo account. Ideally, in a civil society, the elite class is the leader for initiating serious political and social discussions in the public. Meanwhile, the public also relies on and believes in the elite class's ability to challenge the authorities and the state. However, another theme in my findings is audience members' aversion to, rather than trust in, the elite class.

**The elite class is not the boss.** The elite class represents intellectuals, who stand for thoughtful minds. The purpose of inviting experts on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* is to offer more professional insights and suggestions on controversial social issues, which could facilitate reaching an agreement. Trust is a critical component of all stable social relationships (Seligman, 1997). However, it seems that audience members show little trust in what the elite class say on stage. Although television has been shown to be the most persuasive medium for political information, it turned out to be the least persuasive for an untrusted candidate (Worchel, Andreoli & Eason, 1975). On *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, experts functioned as candidates, persuading the guests and the public to accept their arguments. Therefore, if the elite class is difficult to trust, their presented arguments will also be ineffective and not useful for audience members. One comment on the role of experts on the topic of guardianship stated:

I am so disappointed with Liuliu (the name of one of the experts on stage). She is a theorist without any practical suggestions. She was so apathetic towards the individuals in the program. Maybe you have sufficient social experience and were not touched by the separation of parents and children.



But, it was so rude to scorn them. As a professional female writer, you are supposed to behave courteously and show basic respect.

Another comment on child adoption suggested a similar perspective of experts' arrogance in an ironic way:

Can experts stop commenting on individuals from their moral highland? You guys just talk on television. Can you make concrete suggestions to help people? You are the most professional people in China (sarcasm). You can interrupt others anytime (sarcasm). So, you have freedom of speech, but can others even speak a word (sarcasm)?

Although the elite class has received a good education and occupied decent jobs, their legitimacy as representatives on stage is seriously attacked. These comments pointed to their egotism and superiority over the guests, who are ordinary people. In contrast, the elite class regarded themselves as knowing more about the solutions to controversial social issues. This is probably true because of their expertise. However, whether they also know more about how to effectively communicate is another thing entirely. Their conceited attitudes prevented them from understanding the guests' specific situations. The elite class conveyed the cultural values and social norms that conform to their education and living experience. However, their recognized values, such as sacrificing individual rights for harmony, is not accepted by the public. With more accessible resources and cultural exchange, Chinese social and cultural values have been Westernized to some extent. For instance, audience members want individualism and independence in dispute resolution, while the elite class still uphold traditional Confucian principles of harmony. Rather than delivering pluralistic viewpoints and sharing with the public, the elite class is more conservative with traditional values and social norms.

In addition to the conceit of the elite class, the elite class's conservative attitudes also make audience members question whether the elite class speaks for the public or the state. The relationship between the elite class and the state is complicated in China since China is

an elite-led state (Brook, 1997). On one hand, a civil society needs elite class intellectuals to restrict the power of the state. On the other hand, the elite class needs to be protected by the state to gain individual benefits. Therefore, how the elite class leads the public to interpret cultural values and social norms is a fraught topic. On *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom's* official Sina Weibo account, audience comments complained about the elite class's position on solutions to controversial social issue. One comment on the social welfare policy for single mothers stated:

Although the program introduces both sides to discuss this topic, how can the experts be impartial without any partiality towards one side? I think these guests side with what our government wants to advocate. If the program just lets these intellectuals assimilate emerging thoughts, it is not necessary to invite them.

It seems that the elite class has been incorporated as an important instrument for the government and the CCP to disseminate desired social values and norms. In that episode, the topic itself was concerned with the absence of a social welfare policy for single mothers. The current regulation states that if you are a single mother, you have to pay a considerable amount of money for your child's permanent residence registration, which is a prerequisite for the child's access to education, jobs, marriage, and other social opportunities. The debate is supposed to focus on whether the current regulation should be revised to meet new social realities, as the number of single mothers continues to grow in contemporary Chinese society. The guests argued that babies should have equal rights, regardless of their parents' identification and marriage status.

However, the experts diverted people's attention to the moral issue of pre-marital pregnancy rather than discussing policies and laws. Although Chinese society has been Westernized due to globalization and cultural communication, people are still conservative about the status of women's independence. Marriage is a crucial social product for maintaining social stability. Women are only supposed to conceive children when they get

married. So, if a woman has children but does not get married, she cannot enjoy equal rights for her children. Changing current governmental policies on this issue is risky; the experts try to keep the status quo in favor of the government to maintain a stable regime and peaceful society. Therefore, it is not difficult to explain why experts detoured into morality discussions rather than considering bold and innovative policies. Women seeking independence and individual values have struggled to attain rights equal to their counterparts in society. In this case, the elite class still advocates conservative rules and regulations that are compatible with the state's political ideology. One comment directly pointed to this:

We hoped to talk about social schemes and policies, but the experts mixed that with morality discussions. This is concept stealing. The ideology indeed precedes the policy. If there is such an emerging ideology, the society should draft and issue corresponding policies to support it rather than leading public opinions in a firm belief in the current status quo.

Audience members are aware of the experts' support of mainstream political ideology and social values. The experts lacked pluralistic opinions and aligned with what the government supported. In most Western democratic countries, the elite class plays an essential role in counterbalancing the state's power. However, in current Chinese society, the elite class is still affiliated with the state's power.

When audience members complained about social problems in current Chinese society, another common theme among online comments was the comparison between China and democratic countries.

**The grass is always greener.** The grass is always greener is a metaphor for the Chinese adoration of foreign countries. In the episodes that specifically compared China and other developed countries, the majority of comments highlighted the superiority of developed countries over China. One episode discussed Chinese people's distinct preference for Western products. Some of the invited guests regarded Western products as better than Chinese brands. The others were representatives of a domestic brand producing sanitary

goods. The main purpose of that episode was to prove that domestic products were equal or superior to Western products in terms of design and quality standards. In order to achieve that purpose, the program even conducted an experiment, asking blindfolded customers to say which toilet was better after they experienced both. Although the experiment's results showed that participants had better experiences with domestic brands, audience members still expressed their suspicion of domestic brands and their passion for Western products.

One comment stated:

Foreign products indeed stand for higher quality. We cannot negate this truth. As soon as you start using foreign products, you will know the difference. I used domestic toilets before, and sometimes the water splashed everywhere. Our requirements for product standards seem lower than in foreign countries, so our products are not competitive with them at all.

The episode aimed to promote domestic brands and ask for the public's support in independent research and development of Chinese brands. However, audience members still believed foreign products had a relatively higher quality. In fact, this stereotype of the superiority of foreign brands stems from outdated impressions of the Chinese manufacturing industry. In traditional viewpoints, Chinese manufacturing is synonymous with shoddy and cheap products. With globalization and increasing consumption abilities, Chinese people like to choose higher quality products, even if at a higher price. Therefore, low prices have not been an advantageous for Chinese products since people seek a better quality of life. This also reflects the changing life style in transitional Chinese society. The public is not limited to the resources available around them, but turns to diverse alternative choices. Along with the change in consumption practices, values have also gradually transformed. Instead of the traditional value of thrift, the public is beginning to put quality of life first.

The discontent in current Chinese society is not only reflected in commercial product preferences. The grievances lie in the non-transparent procedures, out-of-dated schemes, and

unbalanced social resources in China compared to in Western countries. One comment on the topic of garbage disposal stated:

Waste sorting needs public efforts. More importantly, the government needs to learn some advanced methods from foreign countries. If necessary, relative law enforcement, like what Singapore does, should be implemented.

Dealing with waste disposal seems like a simple problem, and the government should have issued clear laws and regulations for it. However, waste disposal is still a big headache for Chinese people. In comparisons with the useful approaches that are widely used in Western countries, Chinese citizens observe the consequences of the shortage of domestic policies and law enforcement. Other comments on the education system and school bullying also reveal the gap between China and Western countries in terms of policies and social schemes:

The current education system is so morbid. The Western education system is more innovative and effective for children's development. Chinese students need more free time and less pressure, like their counterparts in Western countries.

The law for juvenile delinquency is not rigorous enough. Although they are still young adults, that does not mean that they should be exempt from the corresponding punishments when they commit crimes. If Chinese laws were even half strict as Western laws, the number of prisoners would decrease substantially.

Through comparisons with democratic societies, it is clear that audience members are aware of the gap between China and Western countries regarding social and political perspectives. They think that multiple aspects of current Chinese society need to be improved to catch up with democratic countries. As a developing country, China is still at a preliminary stage of socialism even though its economic development has surpassed most Western countries. With modernization, social and cultural problems are being exposed to the public. When these problems accumulate without solutions, people feel many uncertainties. The public probably lacks understanding of Western societies, but the

stereotype that they are better societies with maximally functioning social systems affects public opinions. Audience members' references to Western countries in discussions of controversial social issues imply their haste to seek a more democratic society with transparent procedures in addressing problems and more up-to-date social schemes and policies.

The analysis of audience members' online comments reveals several public spheres that are prevalent concerning controversial social issues and players in these issues. Corresponding to the seven identified ideal-types of public spheres on Sina Weibo, including "thematic public spheres, short-term public spheres, encoded public spheres, local public spheres, non-domestic political public spheres, mobile public spheres, and meta public spheres" (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2014, p. 144-150), I conclude that audience members' deliberative discussions on Sina Weibo are mixed amongst these categories. Although different issues in various episodes raise diverse thematic public spheres, they are also related to other public spheres, such as local public spheres and short-term public spheres. In my findings, public concerns include government oversight, a lack of the rule of law, perceptions of media trustworthiness, suspicions of the elite class's principles, and comparisons to the Western context.

At first glance, it seems that these spheres are scattered. However, the main theme lies in the specific Chinese context: a transitional society. As a developing country, economic development is still prioritized to a large extent in contemporary Chinese society. However, social and political support has lagged behind, resulting in the rise of controversial social issues. One possible corollary is that if China were still isolated from the outside without the Internet and social media, Chinese citizens would feel fewer grievances towards the government, the media, and elite class since they will not have alternative approaches to compare them to. Although the mainstream media still promotes traditional values in order

to ensure social stability and the legitimacy of the current regime, the public spheres on social media show diverse interpretations of cultural productions in mainstream media.

## Chapter VII

### STUDY 4:

#### THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE TOWARDS CHINESE DISPUTE REALITY TELEVISION

The overreliance on online audience members' attitudes and feedback towards controversial social issues could possibly make this thesis biased in its understanding and analysis of how audience members of dispute reality television shows interpret cultural productions in mainstream media. Therefore, in study 4, I examined offline public's interpretations via four focus groups. It is important to reemphasize that the focus group participants were not regular audience members of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, and they all watched one episode as a stimulus prior to discussions. However, all the participants identified that they had watched similar programs before. In fact, online audience members could also be random viewers who had only watched one episode, rather than regular viewers. The analysis of the focus groups is still valuable in providing more insight into audience attitudes. Furthermore, group interactions enable conversations to develop in more depth, which also provides more information about audience decoding practices. Besides the prevalent public sphere on social media, offline public spheres are also worthwhile to investigate, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the public's decoding of embedded mainstream social values and cultural norms. The first part of this chapter was an overview of the primary method, focus group. The second part of this chapter was an analysis of four focus groups. This chapter concluded with my self-reflection of administering focus groups.

#### **Focus Group**

Predominately relying on online audience members' comments carries a high risk of overgeneralizing the audience members' decoding and their understandings of Chinese dispute reality television. In order to avoid this bias and improve the validity of my research,



I also conducted focus groups with Chinese graduate students at the University of Iowa, whose statements supplemented the previous thematic analysis. Although the participants were not regular viewers of the program, they had all watched something similar. So, they could be regarded as potential viewers of Chinese dispute reality television programs. One of the greatest strengths of focus groups is the flexibility to ask and clarify questions that are meaningful to participants. The participants can use their own words to construct narratives, and the researcher can generate additional questions based on their responses (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). For this study, focus groups provided broader and more detailed articulations of what the program meant and how the program affected understandings of controversial issues in contemporary society. Focus groups are useful for gathering thoughts on social issues that people are highly involved with (Krueger, 2013; Lazar, et al., 2010). Members in focus groups can respond to and interact with each other, which generates many nuanced insights for me as a researcher than do surface data from surveys or isolated data from interpersonal interviews.

I conducted four focus groups and each group included between six and eight participants, with a total of 28 participants. Each focus group had a mixture of females and males. The participants were enrolled Chinese graduate students across multiple disciplines, including Law, Engineering, Mathematics, Medicine, Political Science, and Education in a renowned mid-western University. 12 were females and 16 were males. Although participant age falls within the 24 to 32-year range, which could potentially cause bias due to exclusion of other age groups, there is a lack of solid evidence to suggest that television watching differs by age for dispute reality television shows. According to the official rating statistics, the majority of viewers of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* are aged from 25 to 44, hold at least a bachelor degree with a monthly income above 5000 rmb, approximately 800 U.S. dollars. Therefore, the participants in this project are subgroups of potential viewers

overseas. The participants were recruited by snowball techniques via referees. Potential participants were screened to eliminate those who did not watch any dispute or mediation programs. Therefore, all the participants had watched at least some Chinese dispute resolution or mediation programs. The participants grew up in various provinces in Mainland China, covering all representative geographic locations. So, there was not one typical or principal subculture that dominated conversations. Although these participants were all influenced by U.S. culture to some extent, they were all born in China and lived there for more than 20 years. Thus, they were not foreign and unaccustomed to Chinese culture, social norms, the government, and the Communist Party. Instead, they self-identified as native to the values, cultures and politics in contemporary Chinese society.

The recruiting strategy used did not target those who were easiest to recruit. The recruiting process, in fact, took three months due to the strict requirement for locating participants from multiple disciplines who had prior watching experience of related programs. Each focus group session was divided into two parts. In the first part, participants were required to watch one episode of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*. In order to ensure the consistency of stimulus across focus groups, I played the same episode across all four focus groups. Since all participants were graduate students with a background in college as undergraduates, I chose one episode featuring the conflict between a Chinese undergraduate and her university regarding the topic of fairness. This episode first aired on August 24, 2015, and it remained available on YouKu. As one of the most popular user-generated content video websites, Youku is the equivalent of YouTube in China. All episodes of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* are uploaded on Youku and free to access. The length of this episode was around one hour.

After watching the approximately one-hour long stimulus, participants were led to the discussion section. In general, each session took less than two hours. Each session started

with a brief introduction about *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* and the purpose of this study. Participants were then surveyed as to their prior watching experience of dispute resolution or mediation programs in the past year. All subjects had watched at least one dispute resolution or mediation program. After watching one episode as the stimulus, the moderator proceeded to ask core questions, following up on the answers given by participants. As a moderator, I gave participants wide leeway to interact with each other's answers and come up with new points. When they felt they had exhausted a core question, I proceeded to the next one. At the end of each core question, the moderator summed up the main points and asked participants whether they still had more thoughts to add. All sessions were recorded, and I transcribed the audio recordings afterwards. The moderator also wrote down more in-depth summaries of each session. The questions in the focus groups include: what are possible themes that are reflected in this episode? What do you feel this program's function is in contemporary Chinese society, especially in the influx of the transitional period? Are there any advocated mainstream values in this episode; what are they; and why are they present? What social cues does this episode want to deliver to the audience members? What doubts do you hold about this program?

**Stimulus.** Before turning to the analysis, it is necessary to introduce the stimulus for the participants. In order to refresh the participants' impression of what Chinese dispute reality television shows look like, especially *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, I showed the same episode to each focus group, consistently for all participants. In order to facilitate participants' interest in and engagement with the following conversation, I chose a topic relevant to them as university students. The topic involved a discussion of fairness and justice seeking. A Chinese female university student felt that her term evaluation was unfair, and she claimed that the university did not give her the scores that she deserved. If the university added up all the points she mentioned in her appeal, she would have ranked first

among her cohort. She asserted that the university intentionally disqualified her from being the best student in the evaluation. As a result, she was struggling to be treated with fairness and justice from the university. But the university insisted that their evaluation mechanism was unquestionable. One argument the student made was that if the university was so disappointing in its support and maintenance of social justice, society must be even worse. So, she went on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* in order to seek help in obtaining the fairness and justice she desired.

## **Results**

**The positive power of media.** First of all, all participants recognized the uniqueness of the program and its scope in covering social issues rather than just family or property issues. The following quotes are taken from all the participants and are not quoted more than once. Age, race, and socio-economic status were not taken into consideration as variables in the analysis since all the participants were Chinese students on the same university campus. When the discussion turned to overall impressions of the program, the majority of the participants felt that the program indeed conveyed positive power in current Chinese society. Positive power stands for a series of cultural values and social norms that are advocated and supported by the public. In this specific case, the positive power that participants mentioned referred to open mindedness, generosity, bravery, and adaptability to society. For example:

The program wants to say that the world is as imperfect as nature. Even if you wanted to use your whole life to change it to the best you could possibly imagine, it would be impossible. Instead, you need to tolerate it and stand with it.

What I mean by positive power is different from your definition. My concern is that the invited guest probably could not figure out what problem she had. But once she made it on television, and people pointed out her problem, she will adjust her values to the social desire. You do not feel your awkwardness in reality, but you will sense it when others comment on you on television.

The girl's defiance to the power of authorities (the university here) is unique. Since the program aims to present controversial social issues, this perspective

is good. Because in the overall context, many people will not resist powerful authorities.

It was obvious that participants held competing understandings of positive power. One side agreed that positive power was represented by the girl's bravery in fighting against a powerful authority. Others thought that positive power was found in an acceptance and tolerance of social reality. The opposing viewpoints on positive power reflect the ambiguous definition of positive power in current Chinese society. It is not uncommon to see slogans advocating positive power on all kinds of mass media formats, including newspapers, television, social media, and mobile media apps. Everyone agrees that positive power is effective in leading people to look at the issues around them and to make good decisions. By promoting, demonstrating, and dispersing positive power, the government and the CCP aimed to gain people's confidence in social stability and harmony. However, the participants' opinions indicated that not all people understood positive power identically. One explanation of the inconsistent understandings of positive power is the roles authorities play in specific contexts. If people perceived the authority as an object that could be challenged, they were more likely to understand positive power as virtues that counterbalanced the authority's power. However, if people regarded the authority as solid and firm, they were reluctant to confront that authority. Instead, positive power referred to personal adaptive behaviors to the large social context.

Arguments about positive power raised another main issue in participants' discussions: the relationship between the media and the state. Although *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* was owned by a commercial television corporation, Dragon Television Station, its role in promoting the political ideology of the CCP had been frequently referred to in the participants' discussions.

**Commercial media for the state.** State media has been traditionally and widely acknowledged to be the mouth piece of the government and the CCP (Zhao, 1998).

However, arguments over the role of commercial media in its interplay with the state have been contentious. In this project, over 75% of the participants mentioned the program's primary purpose in serving the political needs of the government and the CCP. For example:

The program is more like an extension of court mediations. The whole process is the same as court decisions, which aim to get problems resolved regardless of right or wrong. There are no regulations in the mediating process as long as you make the final, peaceful results happen.

Mediation does not touch upon the core ideas of fairness and justice. It only wants to tell people that our society is very healthy and life is so good. There is no need to create troubles for society.

In short, viewers of this program were already convinced that dispute reality television shows would support the political ideology. To do so, disputes were addressed with little regard for what the disputants' real concerns were. Participants further identified that the program had an obvious agenda of guiding public opinion. In addition, the participants indicated that the main discussion on stage should have been about how to improve fairness and justice in current society instead of focusing on the insignificant details of the college student's individual case.

So, the purpose of this program is brainwashing. They all persuaded the girl to change herself, but never mentioned the necessity of policy adjustment.

Although the participants claimed that the larger scope of this episode should have been about how to improve current mechanisms to ensure fairness and justice, the program only seemed to use fairness and justice as selling points to attract viewers since it barely touched upon the essence of these topics. In all likelihood, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* merely positioned itself as a communicator to broadcast controversial social issues in transitional Chinese society rather than delving into important discussions of fundamental institutional problems. Since the program presented a controversial issue, it had to offer two differing sets of opinions. However, the program prioritized one side over the other. This

explains why audience members only saw biased arguments in support of the government and the CCP.

This finding confirmed previous literature on the role of the commercial media in facilitating the political ideology and the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes. The commercialization of the media does not jeopardize the legitimacy of the current regime, nor does it decentralize control from the Party. On the contrary, the commercialized media provide diversified approaches for the Party to disseminate its preferred social values and cultural norms to reinforce social stability. One contemporary theorist, Giddens (1985) claimed that the state enforces its order in two ways, through allocative resources and through authoritative resources. Allocative resources are products and material things. Authoritative resources refer to tactics that are employed to surveil people's behaviors. Information is a crucial component of human activities, and the state power engages in "the regularized gathering, storage, and control of information applied to administrative ends" (p. 178). Because the media is a critical conveyer of information, it is inevitably controlled and regulated in China. The participants were aware of the state's tight control over media, and they were accustomed to censorship. Chinese citizens were probably afraid of sabotaging the state's control, but they realized the power permeation in media production.

If the program is not sided with the government's will, it cannot get passed the censorship.

All mediations are successful, and I never saw a failed one. Mediations are useful to solve civil disputes, but the solutions on stage do not mean complete reconciliation. Hugging each other on stage does not make sense.

Censorship is a necessity for mainstream media productions in China. The interviews with the producer and directors of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* also mentioned that their productions had to pass the censorship of SAPPRT. Although censorship has been loosened in cyberspace, dissent and confrontational public opinions are still not commonly seen on the Internet in China. When the moderator asked participants whether they would like to

comment on Chinese social media after watching this episode, the majority of participants said that they would not publicize their personal opinions on social media. One participant referred to her personal experience to show the reason for her reluctance:

I would not leave any of these kinds of comments to stay online forever. Here is a real example. Did you guys still remember Li Tianyi's case? I commented on this case on Sina Weibo like this: I felt pity for the girl at first, but later I thought society was too partial with her. Then, I received much abuse and criticism from her supporters on Sina Weibo. I do not have any relationship to that girl, and I just said my opinion. They thought of me as from the "fifty-cent party", and I thought they were. It is not worth a second try.

The Li Tianyi's case that the participant mentioned was a sensational legal case several years ago in China. Li Tianyi was the son of a famous Chinese singer, whose upright public was unblemished by any negative affairs. However, his son, Li Tianyi, was caught by the police and prosecuted for the crime of rape. The participant said that she commented on this issue on Sina Weibo, but received abusive criticism from other commentators. She also mentioned a notorious term in online communities: the "Fifty-cent party". The "Fifty-cent party" is a term used to describe state-hired "Internet commentators" who lead public opinion on the Internet (Yang, 2009). These commentators do not create public spheres and critical discourses on the Internet. Instead, their guiding comments reflect the policies and principles of Party propaganda (Yang, 2009). Rather than revealing their real identities, the "Fifty-cent party" commentators use anonymous IDs, which are hard to trace by the public. Since they are paid 50 cents (Chinese yuan) for each comment, they are called the "Fifty-cent party." The participant's personal experience in commenting online destroyed her expectation that the Internet could be a platform to empower active citizenship. When people encounter unpleasant commenting experiences, they are less likely to voice their concerns again. As a result, this vicious circle could impede the formations of vibrant public spheres on social media. The public feels discouraged to produce proactive discourses on the Internet. Their reluctance is an obvious hinder to the development of a civil society.



Although the previous section on audience members' online comments suggested that several public spheres interrogated the power of the state, the participants in these focus groups showed their worry and hesitancy about the social media commenting environment, which made them more cautious of expressing their authentic and thought-provoking opinions.

One participant mentioned a new form of commenting, which is prevalent in popular culture productions like TV series, animations, and variety shows. This new form is called "floating comments" or "bullet screen" (dan mu). Viewers can type their comments across the screen like floating bullets. This idea originated in Japanese comic and animation cultures. A well-known website in China called Bilibili attracts millions of viewers with numerous floating comments on various genres of television programs. "Bullet screen", in fact, is a simplified version of connected viewing. In the traditional connected viewing format, viewers have to switch between television and other medium. However, in the "bullet screen" format, viewers can comment on and read each other's comments about the program while simultaneously watching it on the same medium. Different from conventional social media, this emerging form promotes the development of virtual communities for popular cultures. So far, "bullet screen" comments have not been subject to excessive government intervention and control. One important reason is that most of the floating comments are centered on TV series and entertainment shows, which pose little threat of offense to the state-nation's legitimacy of authority. However, since media are also institutionalized as part of the essential organ for the maintenance of state order in China, it is possible to envision the expansion of state control on "bullet screen" comments in a few years.

**Unreliable content vs problem solvers.** Another informative finding from the participants' conversations was their conflicting viewpoints regarding the role media played

in their lives. On one hand, they did not treat media as credible nor did they trust it in terms of content. On the other hand, they recognized media as effective and efficient problem solvers in current Chinese society. Almost all participants were convinced by the authenticity of the invited guests. But audience members showed their doubts towards other components of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, such as the procedures and the invited experts. For example:

Don't you guys think that the girl's reaction was too exaggerated? If she is really determined to commit suicide, she had plenty of time after writing the will. Why is the will for her mother, not for her father and brother? You know, there are too many flaws in the logic.

The host asks questions for specific purposes, which are very biased in understanding the whole issue. Why does the program let her mother come out first? The sequence of the guests matters to a large extent in how information is conveyed.

The participants' critiques of the structure of the program corresponded to my interview questions for the producer and directors. When I mentioned the authenticity of the sources, all interviewees confirmed that all of the sources, including invited guests and experts, were real. There were no hired actors on this program. In terms of audience members' suspicions about the procedures used by the program, producer WH said that it was just a storytelling technique. From the audience's perspective, they yearned for unprocessed information, which represented genuineness and factuality to them. However, as a program in the competitive media market, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* has to use televisual techniques to attract viewers and increase audience ratings. If a reality television program only presents facts in an extremely rational way, audience members might be deprived of some of the pleasure and satisfaction of watching. I also explained to the participants that the broadcasted episodes had been edited. Normally, one episode was recorded for almost four hours, but the length of the broadcast episode was only about forty

minutes. Participants' distrust also came from their awareness of Chinese media's priority in profit-seeking.

Making money is their primary purpose. Anything can be negotiated as long as audience ratings are good.

Participants' insights were identical with the producer and directors' disappointment in the media ecology in current Chinese society. *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* ended in December 2015 due to its low rank among all other programs produced by the Dragon Television Station. All other pursuits paled in comparison with making a profit, which is decisive for a program's survival. Even though the participants did not believe that *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* was a credible and trusted program, they still expressed their expectations for it to be a useful problem solver. Besides the recognition of the media as part of the propaganda machine, the public is also impressed by the media's function as problem solvers in Chinese society:

So, the program did help the girl gain some substantial results. If the girl had not come on this program, she probably would not have gotten any benefits at all.

Actually, the program wants to say that it is very useful for you to get problems solved. Then, the public gains confidence and trust in the media in terms of its advocating effective problem solutions.

In fact, the public expected the media to function as problem solvers for those who were in a predicament and needed help. It was not uncommon to see people resort to the media for help when they did not have alternative options. As a social institution, the media provides citizens with strong support when they encounter problems in the process of becoming part of the larger social network (Silverblatt, 2004). If the government and its affiliated organs performed more effectively and efficiently, the public's expectations for media's social responsibility as problem solvers would be much lower. For instance, if the court could make fair decisions in accordance with the rule of law, there would be no need

for ordinary people, striving for individual benefits, to seek help from the media. However, in a populist authoritarian country, Chinese people find it difficult to get their problems solved via regular approaches. Therefore, the media have been ideal replacement problem solvers for people who do not know where else they can obtain help.

## **Discussion**

These focus groups produced some interesting findings concerning what dispute reality television shows mean in transitional Chinese society. They also clarified the participants' understanding of the media's role at large. They suggested that the media disseminated positive power, which includes cherished social values and cultural norms, such as generosity, benevolence, humanity, etc. However, the perception of media-encouraged positive power changed with the increasing power of the authorities. Sometimes, media-proposed positive power referred to sacrifice, resilience, and adaptation to current social norms. The participants did indicate a strong awareness of the reciprocal relationship between the media and the state. The media relied on the state as a formal social institution to disseminate information and knowledge. The Party-state incorporated the media as a useful and effective channel for ideological propaganda. The participants' awareness of the state's strict control over the media also explained why they were reluctant to voice dissent on social media, even when they had disagreements while watching the program. They knew the power of the "Fifty-cent party" in guiding public opinions in accordance with political preferences. Even though the content and procedures of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* were doubted by the participants, they indicated that social responsibility in the media was desirable since the public cannot find appropriate outlets for help elsewhere. As a social institution, the media is the adhesive between the state and the public that maintains social stability and regime legitimacy.

## **Self-Reflection**

This section's intention is to keep me aware of problems that I encountered in conducting focus groups, such as approaches to recruiting the first participant and failures to connect with online audience members via the messaging function on Sina Weibo. Initially, I planned to administer several focus groups among regular audience members of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*. However, real offline audience members were challenging to find since the program ceased broadcasting in December 2015. So, recruiting live audience members was not feasible. Then, I attempted to recruit online audience members who left comments on the program's official Sina Weibo account, but this approach also seemed hopeless when I received little feedback from those commenters. I sent a paragraph delineating my purpose and asking for possible research participants to more than 200 viewers via the messaging function of Sina Weibo over the course of two weeks, which returned two irrelevant responses. One questioned my identity as a spokesperson for the program while the other one discreetly asked me how I found her Weibo account then told me that she was not a regular viewer of the program, so I could get nothing from her. Their rejections were not uncommon since there are so many scams and so much fraud in Chinese society. As a result, Chinese people are extremely cautious about their information disclosure and online behaviors. Therefore, focus groups with online audience members seemed unmanageable.

Compared to contacting online audience members to administer focus groups, conducting focus groups with Chinese students was simpler since there is no social hierarchy among the majority of Chinese students overseas. However, contacting eligible potential participants was also challenging and complicated as not all Chinese students I know meet the requirements of the study. In addition, I needed to maintain a balance between the number of females and males across multiple disciplines with prior exposure to related

programs. All focus groups were administered by me in the living room of my apartment over several weekends. The composition of participants in these focus groups varied. Therefore, the dynamic of the focus groups also varied. Participants in two groups were already friends and knew each other before coming. They engaged in discussions fiercely without much silence. When one participant delivered his or her opinions, other participants naturally followed the conversation or rebutted the arguments in a straightforward way. For the other two groups, some participants knew each other, but were not familiar with each other as friends. Under this circumstance, I broke the impasse with follow-up questions or additional paraphrasing of the original questions. However, in general, the interactions among participants in these four focus groups were quite active and intense. While watching the stimulus and discussing it, I provided some snacks and drinks for participants. In general, both interviews and focus groups went smoothly and efficiently within the expected time and without any unexpected interruptions.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this dissertation is to examine cultural connotations in mainstream media productions, specifically in the genre of dispute reality television shows, and to analyze audience members' pluralistic and subversive interpretations towards crucial agents in the process. The data showing audience members' decoding of mainstream cultural productions consisted of online comments and discussions from offline focus groups. By analyzing the dynamic relationships among agents—including the mainstream media, social media, the public, and the government—concerning their involvement in cultural productions, I elaborate how mainstream media embed socially-preferred cultural values and norms into productions as well as how audience members exercise their media citizenship to subvert this dominant encoding. This elaboration leads to a relatively comprehensive and in-depth view of the intricate relationship between the media and macro society. Three main sets of questions are posed and answered by this dissertation: 1) How does Chinese dispute reality television produce and embed social values and norms? How do producers perceive audience members' online feedback? 2) What are audience members' attitudes toward televised media, the government, and the elite class in addressing controversial social issues? 3) What are the public spheres that audience members of dispute reality television create on Sina Weibo? Are these public spheres conflictual with the one-Party ideological propaganda? 4) How does the public understand and react to Chinese dispute reality television in general? What are offline audience members' reactions to the political and social effects of Chinese dispute reality television?

In total, there are four studies, which answer each set of the above-listed research questions respectively. Based on the application of a liberal theoretical model, Hall's *encoding and decoding*, study 1 argues that the dominant preferred readings of social values

and norms from powerful authorities still exist not only in state media, but also in commercial media in contemporary Chinese society. In the production of dispute reality television shows, the producer and directors admitted the effect of media marketization and interference from the government on cultural portrayals. The emphasis on economic and capitalistic concerns in production indicates the incorporation of capitalistic values, such as regarding profit-seeking as paramount. In order to attract audience members' attention to the program, the producer and directors employ a variety of entertainment elements, such as the use of dramatic and sensational expressions by the invited guests. This entertainment-oriented approach to conveying desired social values and cultural norms is innovative, and it is becoming prevalent in the Chinese television ecology. It is not uncommon to find many entertainment programs that integrate and implicitly propagate traditional social values, such as fidelity, sacrifice, and loyalty.

But, dispute reality television programs are not completely entertainment programs; their inclusion of discussions about serious controversial social issues earns them extraordinary levels of focus and trust from the government and the Chinese Communist Party. Furthermore, my findings revealed that concerns for political preference from the government and the Chinese Communist Party have been maximized in production. First, all broadcasted episodes have to be censored, which means that if the content contains any subversive and potentially seditious arguments, it will not be aired. This finding substantiates the previous literature concerning the more rigorous censorship of television compared to other media formats. Second, several broadcasted episodes that my interviewees mentioned had a "main rhythm", a way of leading public opinion in order to reinforce social stability and the public's confidence in the legitimacy of the state. The program intentionally builds the desired image of the government and the Chinese Communist Party as positive problems solvers in addressing controversial social issues. In addition, interviewees indicated that they



envisioned *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* as a guidebook, furnishing guidance and proper approaches to conducting mediations. The modeling and exemplifier effect show how mediations can be solved and agreements can be reached in a peaceful and negotiated way.

The main rhythm here is social stability maintenance. From the state's perspective, they do not want to see any potential collective movements that could threaten the order of the state. In order to maintain social stability, the public's grievances and social problems must be addressed. Traditionally, discussions of sensitive issues, such as the bribery, corruption, and mistresses of officials, are not encouraged or even allowed to be broadcast on reality programs as talking points. However, the incorporation of these sensitive issues into dispute reality television shows boost their credibility among viewers. Viewers feel the uniqueness and sincerity of these programs since they dare to challenge conventions. On one hand, this approach satisfies audience members' curiosity. On the other hand, it also indirectly boosts viewers' confidence in the Chinese Communist Party's ability to tackle problems. It aims to persuade the public to believe in the omnipotence of the government and the Party. Therefore, the Party's intervention obviously shows that the dominant encoding inundates the production content. Though one interviewee objected to my labeling "mainstream values" as having political intentions, such values become what Hall describes as "common sense." Once learned, they become part of individuals' lives in ways that can hardly be changed. This naturalization of so called "common sense" is also reflected in dispute reality television production. In the stimulus that I displayed for focus groups, all experts and the host persuaded the college student to stop seeking what she considered to be "fairness" and "justice". She should take her family's situation into account first, and surrender herself to the social reality. All of these values of sacrifice, endurance, and obedience have subtly transformed into the "common sense" of public life. As a result, even the producer himself was not aware of why these values should be cherished and supported

rather than values that prioritize and seek individual rights. This illustrates how schemes of controlling information work.

However, another unexpected finding is conflictual with the state's control over media. Besides conforming to state guidance in information dissemination in public opinions, mainstream cultural productions also suggest some liberal thought is being advocated for in a civil society. Although previous literature has debated the rigor of this concept, its adaptive connotation in China is still valuable for understanding the process of social democratization. The producer and directors' determination in producing Chunming Wu's case has made strides towards constructing a transparent communication environment. Confronting authorities at all levels, including the professor himself, Xia Men university, and even the local government, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* still successfully brought Chunming Wu to justice. From this standpoint, dispute reality television programs also can embed democratic and liberal values, such as the constraint of power and democracy for social and political schemes, in their productions. Mainstream media also exercise their power in restricting other powers, such as power from state-affiliated organizations. The media's role in counterbalancing power is visible and vibrant.

In media convergence, cultural productions in mainstream media are possibly sourced from audience members' contributions. However, my findings negated this possibility in the Chinese context. The producer and the directors all admitted that they did not take audience members' online feedback into consideration or as references for future production. Therefore, the values and social norms in dispute reality television production rarely absorb suggestions from the grassroots. Although the producer and directors included their personal perspectives in the production process to counterbalance the dominant encoding from the authorities, public opinions were still generally ignored.

In general, censored content reflecting the political ideology of the Chinese Communist Party still predominates the values and norms in the production of dispute reality television. Without violating this principal theme, the producer and directors also make valuable efforts in promoting a civil society, such as the democratization of information disclosures and litigation results. All of these concerns are for the common good, not for personal benefit.

Study 2 mainly examined audience members' attitudes towards the role of the government, the elite class, and the media in addressing controversial social issues. I employed traditional content analysis to investigate audience members' comments via three levels of construct: affectively-based, cognitively-based, and behaviorally-based. I also added another variable, constructive feedback, into my coding scheme. Results suggested that the majority of online audience comments were negative. This finding was not surprising since previous studies have proven the predominantly negative valence of social media. However, another finding in the online comments was the rationality of the audience members. Negative online comments have mostly been dismissed as irrational and the commentators as merely finding an outlet to vent their irritation and dissatisfaction. However, my findings indicated that cognitively-based attitudes and constructive feedback significantly contributed to the online discourse. Therefore, online comments should not have depicted as brutal and irrational. Audience members' online comments recognized and elaborated their decoding of the televised role of the government and the media in these controversial social issues. In addition, a small portion of audience members offered their personal insights in facilitating a sound social and political system to support social development and people's wellbeing. Example of such comments were listed in chapter VI. The analysis suggested the existence of public spheres on the official Sina Weibo webpage of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*.

Since quantitative methods cannot delve into the nuanced meanings of texts, I also employed thematic analysis to obtain a more refined understanding of the public spheres on Sina Weibo concerning the public discourse of controversial social issues. In study 3, the examination of audience attitudes showed how audience members decoded constructed social values and norms in the production. Similar to the argument over the existence of a civil society in the Chinese context, previous literature also questioned whether public spheres existed in China, since it did not even have a bourgeois background. In addition, most elite class-led organizations were not separate from the state. However, in my opinion, this limited and conservative attitude in defining public spheres could cause many valuable study opportunities and results to be lost. Therefore, in my dissertation, I am in agreement with the supporters of diversified public spheres in current Chinese society. My findings suggested several themes were created and vibrant on the official Sina Weibo webpage of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, including: 1) the government is the core, 2) the request for the rule of law, 3) media is a paradox, 4) the elite class is not the boss, and 5) the grass is always greener (adoration of foreign countries). Most of these public spheres showed an “oppositional code”, challenging the dominant encoding in the mainstream production.

Audience members criticized the delayed governmental responsiveness and irresponsibility in addressing controversial social issues. Their disappointments derived from the stereotypes of the government’s malfunctions. It is not uncommon to see that state-affiliated organizations often shirk responsibilities and place the blame on each other in addressing social issues in China. When the public has personal grievances, which should be addressed by the government, they are more likely to criticize its lack of accountability. Audience members expected more governmental intervention in regulating these social problems. For instance, comments urged the government to supervise the management and allocation of social resources, such as medical and educational resources. My findings

indicated that although audience members voiced much criticism towards the government's negligence, they still yearned for the government's assistance in curing social problems. The state-affiliated organizations need to fulfill their due responsibilities. Another awareness among audience members is for the need of the rule of law. Regardless of what kind of disputes are presented, a lack of the application of rigorous and procedural law is a concern that can be discerned in online audience comments. In the case of the demolition and reconstruction of old cities, audience members precisely pointed out the malpractice that occurred in the demolition process. Compensation should be accurately appropriated to all family members whose rights were violated. However, these issues were not addressed in accordance with relevant laws and regulations. The public sphere showed strong urges to promote and abide by the rule of law in current Chinese society. The application of the rule of law does not only require training in legal professionals, it primarily needs the state and the Chinese Communist Party's support and implementation. Since the 18th Party congress in 2012, the core socialist values have been extensively promoted. "Justice and the rule of law" is among them. However, audience comments suggested that the development of the rule of law in China has been laggard. In recent years, president Xi has implemented a series of new schemes to boost the public's confidence in the legal system, such as the reform of court personnel management. This reform can improve professional judicial expertise. More importantly, this reform largely enhances judicial responsibility and fairness since all cases under one member of the personnel can be retrieved as long as that individual is alive, even after his/her retirement. Numerous policies have been carried out to reinforce the rule of law, but the implementation still seems difficult when involving authorities, such as in the demolition case in controversial social issues.

Different from a unilateral critique of the government, the third theme concerns the role of media as a paradox. The media's contradictory roles as a governmental mouthpiece

and a watchdog have been contentiously debated in the Chinese context. My interviews indicated the complicated relationship between these two, since the media did speak for the government, but it also promoted transformation to a civil society. Audience members did recognize the media's role in digging up controversial social issues, but they demanded more than just this exposure of problems. My findings indicated that the social responsibility of the media was mentioned many times in online audience comments. Chinese media are expected to practically and feasibly solve issues rather than produce superficial coverage and discussions of issues. On one hand, audience members expect the media to be an independent organization that can speak for the public's opinions rather than just conveying state ideology. On the other hand, audience members also anticipate the media to a social affiliation that facilitates the resolution of controversial social issues.

Although the elite class, consisting of Chinese intellectuals, was supposed to challenge the state's power in enforcing a civil society, my findings did not strongly support this argument. Audience members indicated that they did not trust the experts' arguments, arguing that the experts' suggestions were not feasible or practical to the invited guests. Most of the time, the experts used morality to blame and persuade the invited guests. However, there exists an asymmetry and hierarchical order between the experts and those invited guests. The arrogance and superiority of the experts prevented them from suggesting applicable solutions; instead they functioned as theorists. In addition, rather than defending the rights of the invited guests, the experts were more likely to uphold politically and socially-preferred social values and cultural norms, such as the importance of sacrificing individual rights in order to achieve harmony. The experts also tried to instill their supported values into the public. However, their alliance with the government and the Chinese Communists Party has been perceived by the public. Influenced by Westernization and democratic values, audience members seek for values like equality and the protection of

individual rights rather than the overwhelming advancement of traditional Chinese values in accordance with political ideologies. As noted in the previous paragraph, socialist core values indeed include the values of fairness and equality, but the implementation of these liberal values in dealing with controversial social issues becomes difficult when the legitimacy of the authority could be impaired. So, the elite class preferred to promote traditional social values in alliance with the government rather than to introduce pluralistic and democratic values. As a program that defined itself as presenting two sets of opinions, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* featured some experts that questioned the current political and social system, which caused the rise of controversial social issues. But, most of the time, the oppositional side surrendered to the supporters of the mainstream social values. In addition, the experts' frequent references to morality reiterated the importance of mediation over the rule of law in resolving controversial social issues. So, audience members were aware of the role of the elite class as the representative of the mainstream ideology. Audience members expressed rebellious viewpoints on the elite class's discourse in dispute reality television shows in their online comments.

The last theme was that which compared Chinese society and its counterparts in developed countries. I used a metaphor to describe this public sphere: the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, which refers to the public's adoration of developed countries. Online audience comments praised the high quality of products in Japan and Western countries. In contrast, domestic products were mostly described as shoddy. Since the opening-up policy in the 1970's, diversified small businesses and factories were built in the Southern part of China. Thanks to cheap labor, light industry was prosperous and generated much revenue for the state. Gradually, the term "made in China" began to stand for shoddy products. In contrast, "made in Japan", "made in Germany", and "made in the U.S." have come to symbolize high quality. In addition, double standards existed when the

same product was sold in China and in countries outside of China. When I finalized this dissertation, I happened to be watching part of the annual “3.15” program on CCTV, which commemorates China’s annual Consumer Rights Day. One newly exposed scandal was about the double standards regarding one same style of Nike shoes in China and in the U.S. In the Chinese version of the shoe, there was no extra cushion, which was the main selling point in the advertisement. However, the cushion existed in the U.S. version. Nike was sued to pay three times the cost in compensation according to relevant consumer protection regulations. This was just another example outside the realm of my dissertation research that showed audience members’ disappointment in products sold in China. Audience members’ comparisons did not only exist in consumerism; they also extended to the overall social and political systems. For instance, in the allocation of educational and medical resources, audience members pointed out the obvious gap between China and Western countries. Regardless of commercial products, social resources, and political mechanisms, the comments revealed that audience members envisioned a more democratic, healthier society if China could learn from Western countries. This belief could possibly include many perspectives, including the importance of social and political support in building a more equal, transparent, honest, and open society. The comparison suggested Chinese citizens’ desire to have a more liberal and democratic society by reforming political and social policies.

In study 4, the fourth set of research questions are answered by the analysis of the four focus groups. The participants are not regular audience members of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, so their opinions somehow could reflect how the public reacted to dispute reality television shows in general. Meanwhile, they can be also considered to be offline audience members after watching the stimulus, one episode of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*. Three main themes were identified: 1) the positive power of media; 2) commercial media for the



state; and 3) unreliable content VS problem solvers. My findings indicated that the participants had different understanding of positive power. The contentious understandings depended on whether authority was involved or not. Unlike traditional definitions of positive power in proposing values of honesty, justice, equality, etc., it could also be understood as behaviors adaptive to social desires. After viewing the stimulus, the participants identified that all the guests tried to persuade the girl to yield to social reality, even though some experts seemed to regard the college student's situation unfairly. In terms of commercial media serving the state's purpose, the participants' arguments were identical to arguments in online audience comments concerning the assimilated role of commercial media in the service of the government and the Chinese Communist Party. In March 2016, president Xi reemphasized the loyalty of state media in supporting the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Although he only mentioned state media, and did not require commercial media to do so, the majority of commercial media choose to keep in line with the state media in order to survive. The participants' reluctance to show their cognitive and rational viewpoints on social media was not surprising. One participant used her personal example to illustrate her previous unpleasant experience commenting on controversial social issues on Sina Weibo. My findings indicated that the participants either felt commenting was unnecessary or meaningless since they knew that their comments would either be intentionally misinterpreted, harmonized, or even disregarded without being viewed and responded to. This also explains the limited numbers of comments on the official Sina Weibo page of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* over three years.

Similar to online audience comments, the participants were skeptical of the credibility of the content. The structure of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* was not convincing for them, and there were logical problems in the production. However, unlike online audience members' expectations for media to take on social responsibility in

resolving controversial social issues, the participants in the focus groups were aware of the essential purpose of the media's role as problem solvers: social stability maintenance. Social harmony and stability are the most critical indicators of the legitimate status of the government and the Chinese Communist Party. In 2010, the Supreme People's Court issued a note, reemphasizing the importance of mediation in maintaining normal social order. This note prioritized mediation over other solutions in court sentences. My findings indicated that no matter what cases were presented on *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, and regardless of what the invited guests' appeals were, the final purpose of the program was to get problems solved by defending the legitimacy of the nation-state.

Although these four studies are separately presented in this project, they are not isolated from each other in terms of conveying the core idea of mainstream production and audience citizenship in current Chinese society. The four studies supplement each other from various angles in understanding Chinese dispute reality television and the public's understandings of this genre of its social impact. In general, study 1 generated several types of encoding in Chinese dispute reality television, including the market, state and liberal-oriented perspectives. These encodings are not identical to propagate the state-preferred interpretations of social values and cultural norms. In fact, the encoding in production showed liberal components of advocating a more transparent and democratic society for the public. These encodings seemed to conflict, but they all aimed to sustain social harmony and stability. Study 2, 3 and 4 are all pertinent to audience members' decoding of mainstream social values and norms in controversial social issues in the context of Chinese transitional society. The content analysis in study 2 gave me confidence of the presence of cognitive and rational comments concerning key players in addressing controversial social issues. Study 3 and study 4 allowed me to contextualize these cognitive and constructive online comments and analyze their semantic meaning within the larger social and cultural context. Although

study 3 focused on online audience members, and study 4 highlighted the public in general, the decoding from audience perspective was mostly identical. The decoding was centered on the public awareness of the government-led interpretations of social values and cultural norms, disappointment of the government unaccountability in addressing controversial social issues, and expectations for social affiliations, such as media, to help solve social problems. Most of the decoding belonged to negotiated decoding, which was not radically opposite to the encoding, but provided some critiques and suggestions. In examining the importance of Chinese dispute reality television in Chinese transitional society, both production (study 1) and audience perspectives (study 2, 3 and 4) were needed to present a panorama. Methodologically, multiple studies from the audience perspective also offset potential drawbacks of the overreliance on one dominant approach.

Conceptually, via the examination of dispute reality television shows in China, this project argues for: 1) the lasting, rigorous control over mainstream media productions by the government and the Chinese Communist Party; 2) the vibrant public spheres on Sina Weibo concerning the role of the government, the elite class, and the media in addressing controversial social issues; 3) a progressive civil society via marketization of media and public spheres at the grassroots level. Dispute reality television shows play indispensable roles in transitional Chinese society. On one hand, the government expects them to broadcast social problems and demonstrate how the government addresses these issues for the public. On the other hand, along with information dissemination and the guidance of public opinion, audience member also expect dispute reality television shows to speak for the public and to facilitate the democratization of Chinese society. Therefore, conflicts of codes appear in mainstream media productions. My findings suggested that public opinions were rarely incorporated in the production process. With media convergence, audience members can access the official Sina Weibo page to rebut the socially-preferred values in dispute reality

television shows. Audience members exercise their media citizenship to check the authorities and to request effective and efficient responsiveness from the government. In addition, audience members strive for the protection of individual rights and the rule of law in solving social problems. When I was conducting my research, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* was canceled by the Dragon Television Station due to its low ratings. This initially caused me to doubt the significance of my study. However, I am confident that this program remains a suitable representative of how mainstream media play a role in presenting, mediating, and addressing controversial social issues in transitional societies.

The findings are not only applicable to other dispute resolution programs in China, but are also suitable to analyze public attitudes towards the major players in controversial social issues arising in transitional societies. Additionally, this dissertation is useful for research on audience activism and citizenship in regimes that exert strict control over media to limit freedom of speech. Regardless of the form of the regime, democratic or nondemocratic, the relationship between media and macro society is valuable for research. My exploration of the complicated role of the media in the socialist context could also be applied to other pro-social states, where media can be a mouthpiece for critical agents as well as a potential avenue to check authorities and promote the formation of a civil society. The divisive characteristics of media in socialism offers innovative perspectives for scholars' prospective research on how media reconciled the tension between the state and the public. In addition, based on media convergence, we can have a better understanding of media citizenship.

Methodologically, this dissertation applied both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A representative portion of documents from the large dataset learns these coded documents and applies that information to unseen documents in the large dataset, resulting in more fruitful analysis with the involvement of attitudes towards the government, the elite

class, and the media. However, I still felt that the limited quantitative approach was inadequate to elaborate the complicated contextual meaning of audience members deliberative discourse. Thus, I conducted thematic analysis and focus groups in order to delve more deeply into the decoding of audience members' cultural productions in dispute reality television shows. The narrow examination of limited data provided me with insights into how audience members contextualize their decoding in transitional Chinese society. In addition, interviews with the producer and directors prevented me from making excessive assumptions about the mainstream media production process. Furthermore, focus groups with offline audience members offset my overreliance on online data, which was anonymous and potentially unreliable. Overall, the combination of content analysis, interviews, thematic analysis, and focus groups suggests a comprehensive approach in answering my research questions.

This project provides an enhanced conceptual framework of Hall's encoding/decoding and Habermas' public spheres in the transitional Chinese context. Future research on the role of media in transitional societies could probably offer other insights supplementary to the findings in this project. The application of diversified methods in digital studies also substantiates the overlap among methods in mass communication research. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods is desirable in investigating texts on social media.

### **Broader implication**

Although this project is situated in the Chinese context and is concerned with a specific genre, dispute reality television shows, it is not detached from discussions of the complicated relationship between media and society, nor from considerations of the crucial agents in that relationship in a broader sense. Dispute reality television is just one representative example, illustrating how the wider social problems that stem from

controversial social issues are portrayed in mainstream media and showing how these issues are addressed by key players, such as the government, the elite class, and media. In addition to substantiating the stereotype of the media as a propaganda machine, this project also highlights the progressiveness of traditional mainstream media in authoritarian countries in seeking a more democratic and civil society based upon fairness, transparency, and people's wellbeing. This is a significant breakthrough for the mainstream media in authoritarian countries since its strong attachment to the Party is also impacted by the market economy and the subtle transformation of liberal minds under globalization. This project implies that the role of mainstream media in transitional societies could be pluralistic, including information dissemination, propaganda, and civil society building.

In line with previous scholarship on public spheres in non-democratic countries, this project also identifies several themes on online public spheres. Rather than analyzing scattered public spheres across social media platforms, the narrow focus of this study offers particular insights into media citizenship, focusing on social problems in transitional societies. This project corroborates other research/findings that vibrant public spheres, where individuals can interrogate the power of the government, the elite class, and media, help shape public opinions. The communication between mainstream media and the public is still not reciprocal since the mainstream media in authoritarian countries rarely adopt public suggestions in future productions. Although social media provide audience members with opportunities to connect with cultural productions in mainstream media, the effect is limited due to the lack of effective responsiveness from mainstream media.

My dissertation could also be considered as part of audience studies. There are no standardized templates for audience research, and this study informs future audience research in authoritarian countries in the following aspects: 1) audience engagement on social media is cognitive. Audience members' attitudes towards powerful agents are beyond the

sensational and the superficial. The majority of audience members recognize themselves as cognitive viewers with deliberative thoughts on mainstream cultural productions; 2) audience agency is limited. Although audience members have been empowered to a larger extent on social media compared to traditional interaction approaches, visible and invisible censorship prevents audience members from active participation; and 3) audience citizenship is vibrant. Not only do online audience comments suggest audience involvement in checking authority, they question government responsiveness and inquire into elite class and media responsibility. The offline audience members in my focus groups also identify themselves as active participants in challenging current social and political policies. Therefore, my study sheds light on the role of audience members who actively exercise their citizenship.

This project highlights cultural productions in mainstream media in transitional societies as well as audience members' polysemic interpretations of socially/politically-preferred encoding of social and cultural values. On one hand, it reinforces the irreplaceable role of mainstream media in information dissemination for the Party in authoritarian countries. On the other hand, it envisions the power of audience citizenship as a strong impetus for the formation of a civil society. Examining the relationship between media and society in an influx of controversial social issues in transitional societies is rewarding because it allows us to understand how mainstream media encode these issues and how the public decodes them in their everyday lives.

## APPENDIX

### NARRATIVES OF *ORIENTAL PEARL LIVE NEWSROOM*

*Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* was a nationwide Chinese dispute reality television program via Shanghai dragon television station. The program highlighted controversial social issues covering a wide range of topics, such as medical care policy, education system, the government integrity, environment protection, etc. In my dissertation, I cited multiple cases in the interview and audience analysis. Although those individual cases varied by topics, they were pertinent to the controversies of related political or social systems in Chinese transitional society.

There were no standard answers for those social problems, but audience members showed strong interest in discussing these issues, which were salient to their daily life. Like most dispute reality television programs, *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* invited professions to provide interpretations and suggestions towards those social issues. The most valuable component of the program lies in its content authenticity. All controversial social issues were real, and all invited guests were parties who experienced these issues.

In *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom*, after the host introducing the topic, the parties were invited to stage one by one. After their statements of personal concerns, professions presented their understandings, and proposed a possible solution. Opinions from professions were contradictory in most cases showing controversies in addressing these presented social issues. Most episodes ended with a feasible solution for both invited parties, but some were left to open discussions. The profession with expertise often persuaded invited parties to reconcile and reach an agreement regardless of their personal appeals. The whole process of *Oriental Pearl Live Newsroom* showed how conflicts could be resolved for social stability and state legitimacy.



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