# Promoting harmony with conflicts? A study of reality television in China

Li, Z.

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# Promoting Harmony with Conflicts?

## A study of reality television in China

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**Zheng LI**

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**Promotiecommissie:**

*Promotor:*

Prof. Dr. Kees Brants

*Co-Promotor:*

Dr. Daniela Stockmann

*Overige Leden:*

Prof. Dr. Joop van Holsteyn

Prof. Dr. Stefan Landsberger

Dr. Rebekah Tromble

| | |
|---|---|
| Prof. Dr. Jeroen de Kloet | University of Amsterdam |
| Prof. Dr. Liesbet van Zoonen | Erasmus University Rotterdam |

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# Abbreviation and Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| ADR | Alternative dispute resolution |
| CCP | Chinese Communist Party |
| CCTV | China Central Television |
| CNNIC | China Internet Network Information Center |
| MoJ | Ministry of Justice |
| NPC | National People's Congress |
| OTV | Shanghai Oriental TV station |
| PD | Propaganda Department |
| RTS | Radio and TV Shanghai |
| SARFT | State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of China |
| SMEG | Shanghai Media and Entertainment Group |
| SMG | Shanghai Media Group |
| SJB | Shanghai Justice Bureau |
| STV | Shanghai Television |
| WTO | World Trade Organization |
| XLNJ | Xin Lao NiangJiu (新老娘舅), a reality mediation TV show |

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# Chapter One

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

In much of the Western world, the common image of Chinese television is often one of tradition, seriousness, and political control. That may have been the case before the turn of the century; however, with the diffusion of economic reforms into the media domain, Chinese television has been used to promote economic modernisation, and the state's ideology has become 'de-emphasized' (Lee 1990). Since China entered into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, broadcasting in the nation has become relatively more liberalised—both in terms of organisation and of programming—introducing new TV channels with more Western-style entertainment including reality television shows.

In 2008, the Shanghai Entertainment Channel started to air a new type of TV programme: a reality television mediation show called *Xin Lao NiangJiu* (新老娘舅, hereafter *XLNJ*; literal meaning: New Elder Uncle[1]). The show quickly became very popular in Shanghai and its surrounding areas. According to the *China Television Annual Book* (Wang 2010,451), it was ranked 17 out of the Year 2009 Top 30 most popular programmes in Shanghai, achieving on average 8.2 percent audience ratings (about 1.81 million people) and 27 percent market share[2]. At the time, it was unprecedented and innovative to show people's mediation on TV, which made the show a unique television genre. On the show, people who have a dispute were invited to talk about their contentious issues, and these are then discussed live and ideally solved with the help of a mediator—usually a judge, a lawyer, or a People's Mediator, who has good knowledge of

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[1] In the Chinese context, the term *Niangjiu* refers specifically to a maternal uncle.

[2] Audience rating indicates the percentage of the sample watching a particular programme or channel out of the total market population. In contrast, market share refers to the percentage of persons or households tuned to a channel or a programme at a given time period out of the total number of persons watching television at that time period. According to the official census, the permanent population of Shanghai in 2009 stood at 22.103 million (see Shanghai Statistics Bureau 2014)

civil laws and/or relevant regulations and policies. The show soon established the reputation of helping ordinary citizens to solve their common issues.

In the wake of the success of the *XLNJ* show, mediation shows have proliferated on other television stations, especially in 2010 when the China's Supreme People's Court officially promulgated the People's Mediation Law of the People's Republic of China (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Renmin Tiaojie Fa*), which provided legal backing to mediation and attempted to bring social organisations—such as mediation committees or neighbourhood committees—into play at an early stage to ease conflicts and tensions and prevent the deterioration of disputes. Similar popular types of programmes—sometimes also labelled as problem-solving or life-counselling programm*es (bangmang lei jiemu)*[3]—can be found in other cities and provinces; for instance, True Feelings Mediation (*Zhenqing Tiaojie*) in Qingdao, The Third Mediation Court (*Di San Tiaojie Shi)* in Beijing, Golden Medal Mediation (*Jinpai Tiaojie*) in Jiangxi, Qiantang Elder Uncle (*Qiantang Lao Niang Jiu*) in Zhejiang, and Help You Till the End (*Yi Bang Daodi*) in Shandong. By 2012, there were 47 television mediation shows being broadcast daily or weekly by 40 local television stations and 7 provincial satellite networks (see Appendix 1 for a list of mediation shows in China up to 2012)[4]. These mediation shows have found a niche, not only by achieving high audience ratings, but also by responding to the then Hu-Wen government's demands for establishing and maintaining a 'harmonious society'.

Being the first mediation show endorsed by the local justice bureau, *Xin Lao NiangJiu* is seen by the local government as an important tool for promoting people's mediation and social harmony (Li 2010b). The propaganda department organised several seminars during which officials discussed the social influence of the show with television makers, sociology professors, and other scholars (see Chapter Five). It turned out that issues solved on TV mediation often involve disputes related to the distribution of real estate property, financial issues, and in-family relations (including parent-child, siblings,

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[3] In some audience rating reports, Chinese television practitioners categorise mediation shows and other shows providing solutions to citizens' issues in life into a broad category called problem-solving or life-counselling programmes. In this dissertation, problem-solving programmes and life-counselling programmes are interchangeable.

[4] Based on the analysis report of Feng (2011), I update the total number by including 6 more programmes. These programmes are selected from two general categories: Specialised programmes (专题类节目) and Life service shows (生活服务类节目). All programmes that mediated/solved disputes are included.

and in-law relations). On the show, mediators often adopt a mixed approach of empathic listening, moral persuasions, and basic knowledge of regulations and policies. A specific example from *Xin LaoNiangJiu* can provide a better understanding of the show.

## 1.2 Example Case: A Battle of Conscience

Eighty-year-old Ms Zhang lives alone on her minimal pension in a one-bedroom flat in Shanghai[5]. Under the financial pressure of her increasing medical costs, Ms Zhang plans to sell her flat, but her step-granddaughter—who is officially registered as living in the same place but actually lives outside Shanghai in Jiaxing (in Zhejiang Province)—refuses to sign the transfer agreement. Ms Zhang therefore cannot sell the property, because Chinese law requires that cohabitants must consent to the selling of the flat. Out of helplessness, Ms Zhang turns to the mediation TV show *XLNJ*. The reputable mediator Bai Wanqing invites the mother of her step-granddaughter, Ms Yang, to come to Shanghai for a mediation on TV.

On the show, Ms Zhang and Ms Yang sit on the couch in the studio facing each other. With the guidance of the show host, they recount their story, which is a complicated one: Ms Zhang was the first wife of her husband, Mr Yang, with whom she had no children. Mr Yang and his second wife had a daughter, who is Ms Yang. In the 1950s, Mr Yang and his second wife moved from Shanghai and settled in Jiaxing, leaving their daughter to live with her stepmother, Ms Zhang, in Shanghai. In 1969, during the Cultural Revolution, Ms Yang moved to settle down in Jiaxing and married a local worker, with whom she had a daughter, who is the aforementioned step-granddaughter. In 1979, the Shanghai government launched a resettlement policy allowing the children of sent-down youths to return to Shanghai. Mr Yang then decided to settle his granddaughter's *hukou* (residence registration)[6] at Ms Zhang's home. Therefore, it

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[5] This case was broadcast on December 5, 2009, titled 'She is not my granddaughter'. The story was also narrated and published on Xinmin Evening News (新民晚报), October 19, 2010. The Chinese version can be accessed online via the link: http://www.news365.com.cn/wxpd/bhygb/ygb/201010/t20101020_2856418.htm [Accessed on January 28, 2015]. This case was one typical dispute that manifests the complex situation where interpersonal relations are intertwined with legal regulations (see Hawes and Kong, 2013 & 2014).

[6] *Hukou* is a record in China's household registration system, and it is required by law in mainland China. *Hukou* officially records identifying information of a person as a resident of an area, including one's name, parents,

became the current situation that Ms Zhang and her step-granddaughter are in theory cohabitants, while in fact Ms Yang lives somewhere else.

Now, Ms Zhang claims that Ms Yang's migration to Jiaxing was voluntary, to follow her birth parents, so that she should not be categorised as a sent-down youth, and therefore, the step-granddaughter should not have benefited from the resettlement policy. Ms Zhang says that her ex-husband, Mr Yang, moved the step-granddaughter's *hukou* to Shanghai without informing her first, and she had been kept from the truth until Mr Yang's death a couple of years before. Based on this argument, Ms Zhang claims that she should have the full ownership of the property because her step-granddaughter's *hukou* is invalid. As a result, she should be able to sell the property without the step-granddaughter's consent.

After the story is made clear, the mediator, Bai Wanqing—known as Aunty Bai (*Bai Ayi*), a retired government official who is known for her sharp-tongued style—begins her mediation between the two parties. Firstly, she tells Ms Zhang that the legitimacy of her step-granddaughter's residence status is beyond doubt. Bai points out that Ms Yang's migration in 1969 should be considered as part of the sent-down educated youth movement, even if she moved from Shanghai voluntarily. She believes that the spirit of the Shanghai government's resettlement policy was to allow all children of sent-down youth[7] to return to their parents' home city. The government would not have processed the step-granddaughter's residence application at the time, if her mother had not been considered a sent-down youth. Besides, according to the regulation that was in force at the time, the step-granddaughter's *hukou* can be registered in Shanghai as long as the homeowner—who was Mr Yang at that time—has given permission. Therefore, Mr Yang registering his granddaughter's residence was a legally recognised act, satisfying the law. After hearing all of these facts, Ms Zhang admits that her step-granddaughter not only

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spouse, and date of birth. Respondents were asked in which place their *hukou* is registered, and what type it is, i.e. rural or urban.

[7] Sent-down youth, also known as *zhiqing* (知青), were the young educated people who left urban cities to settle in rural areas against their will, living and working as local peasants. It was part of the 'Up to the mountains and down to the countryside movement' (上山下乡运动) during the period from the beginning of the 1960s to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. See a more detailed account in Chapter Two.

has a valid *hukou* but also the legal right to ultimately inherit the flat. Of course, she must get her step-granddaughter's consent before selling the property.

After Bai has clarified the issue of legal ownership to both disputing parties as well as the audience, she proceeds to deal with the distribution of the flat. This proves to be a difficult dilemma in terms of 'conscience'. On the one hand, Ms Zhang is a poor elderly lady suffering from a severe disease. Her demand to sell the flat and split the proceeds is reasonable and understandable; she needs money to cover her living and medical costs. On the other hand, Ms Yang's financial circumstances are not better, since both Ms Yang and her husband had been laid off in the 1990s. Therefore, it is not wrong for Ms Yang to insist on keeping the flat, because her daughter will inherit it after Ms Zhang passes away. Both parties can be considered to belong to the 'socially disadvantaged groups' (*shehui ruoshi qunti*).[8] Taking either party's side would certainly hurt the other.

Being aware of the moral dilemma, Bai tells Ms Yang that she has legal rights to either sell the flat or keep it, but it would morally be more appreciated to agree to sell the property. Bai reminds Ms Yang that it was Ms Zhang who treats her as her own child and took care of her when she was left by her own parents in Shanghai. Bai tells Ms Yang that she will feel guilty if she and her daughter insist on keeping the flat, with Ms Zhang in great financial need. Under this moral persuasion, Ms Yang agrees not to insist on keeping the flat. Bai then proposes two solutions: one is to sell the property and split the money between Ms Zhang and Ms Yang, and the other is that Ms Yang buys out the part of the flat that belongs to Ms Zhang. Ms Yang decides to choose the latter. Then Bai persuades Ms Zhang to agree on a reasonable price because Ms Yang's family cannot afford a high price. In the end, both parties reach a mutual agreement.

This example demonstrates how a dispute is solved in a mediation show through a more morally appreciated approach—by reminding both parties about the positive aspects of their past relations, the mediator guides them to place themselves in each other's shoes and make a compromise. To a large extent, the show manifests the spirit as called for by the authority at the time—establishing and maintaining a harmonious society. We can see how TV mediators, such as Bai Wanqing, combine moral persuasion,

[8] Bai indicated in an interview I had with her that it is her wish to help the disadvantaged groups in society and protect their rights. These groups include previously sent-down youths and their children, laid-off workers, migrant workers, the poor, and the living-alone elderly.

government policy, and legal regulations[9] to mediate between the disputant parties and help them to reach a compromise. In the show, we find that interpersonal relations and family bonding outweigh legal or individual rights when the mediator provides disputing parties with her suggestions. From issues in the show, we see that family disputes can be complex; one cannot simply judge who is right and who is wrong. In the majority of cases—be they family issues or more economic or political—disputing parties often have equally valid justifications for their arguments. Although in some cases the final solution seems to benefit one party, the ultimate resolution is more or less a compromise made by both parties.

Moreover, this example indicates that many factors are involved in a seemingly simple family dispute over housing property. If we take a further look into the dispute, we can see how social and political changes also have a generational impact: Ms Yang was initially sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, and later lost her job due to economic reforms. People who are in similar situations as Ms Yang can be found in many other broadcast episodes, as well, encountering a declining financial situation when being laid-off, living in cramped conditions because of unaffordable increasing housing prices, etc. Apparently, the mediation show seems not only to have the function to help the ordinary citizens, but also to pacify their grievances.

The seemingly apolitical family dispute involves a series of factors reflecting the impact of social, economic, and political changes. These changes in the Chinese context and their social effects have formed the basis for the rise of the mediation show, which will be discussed in the next paragraphs (Section 1.3). While the social and cultural context as well as the media reform to a certain extent sustain the popularity of the show, there are inevitable contentions brought by the show in terms of political, entertainment, and cultural aspects. I will further discuss this puzzle of my research question and aim of this study in Section 1.4. The last section will provide a layout of the dissertation structure.

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[9] Bai summarised these three principles in mediating family disputes on television.

## 1.3 Context for the Emergence of the Mediation Show

### *1.3.1 Social Issues and Impact of Political Change*

As a part of the political movement during the 1960s and 70s, many others of Ms Yang's generation left the cities and moved to the countryside (see Chapter Two). When the central government finally ended the rustication programme in 1978[10], a vast number of unmarried rusticated youth were allowed to return to Shanghai[11]. It was not until 1989 when the Shanghai government enacted another policy that permits the educated youths' children—one child per family—to return to Shanghai with a *hukou*, provided that they had extended family who were willing to accept them. In this case, according to the policy, Mr Zhang arranged to transfer his granddaughter's *hukou* to Ms Zhang's apartment, though she lived with her mother, Ms Yang, outside Shanghai in Jiaxing. In many other cases, the educated youth and/or their children returned to Shanghai and lived with their extended family members in cramped flats, which often triggered family conflicts.

In the 1990s, the sent-down youth generation suffered again, being laid off (*xia gang*) as a consequence of structural reform of state-owned enterprises and large-scale privatisation—there was a 48 percent drop of state-owned enterprise in the early 2000s (Brandt, Rawski, and Sutton 2008)—which caused an enormous number of workers to be laid off. The retrenchment of millions of workers occurred and brought about labour unrest across the country. Laid-off workers like Ms Yang often appear on the *XLNJ* show, usually having faced similar difficulties: declining financial situation because of unemployment or low income, living in cramped conditions because unaffordable increasing housing prices, etc.

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[10] The Cultural Revolution ended in September 1976 with the death of Mao Zedong. But the subsequent government under Hua Guofeng continued the rustication programme until 1978 when Deng Xiaoping returned to power. Because of the obvious financial failure the programme incurred and the pressure from pleas of the educated youth who felt their lives were wasted in the rural area, the programme came to an end in 1978. For detailed accounts of the rustication program, see Yihong Pan, 2003, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace: China's Youth in the Rustication Movement.*

[11] The local government introduced a policy that unmarried youth could return to the city. Many who had married locals abandoned their spouses, and sometimes children, in order to get back to Shanghai. A well-known television drama Unpaid Debt (nie zhai) portrayed cultural and social conflicts when a group of abandoned children come to Shanghai to find their birth parents. More details are discussed in Chapter Two.

The household registration, *hukou*, plays a crucial part in many family issues that sent-down youth and their children, as well as non-local in-laws, often experience. This is because, as a holder of urban *hukou*, they will be entitled to a full spectrum of social rights and welfare benefits including compensation for demolition, better medical care, and rigorous education. The government enacted a new policy in 2009, announcing that all sent-down youth are entitled to Shanghai *hukou* when they reach retirement age (60 for men, 55 for women) provided that they can afford a house in Shanghai or have a child in the city who will house them. Therefore, Ms Yang's daughter inheriting the apartment in the future means that she could transfer her *hukou* back to the city eventually. Perhaps, the policy change along with the increasing house prices adds to the reason why Ms Yang and her daughter insisted on not selling the apartment—they need this place for *hukou* registration, and they were not able to afford a home with their part of the proceeds.

The past three decades have witnessed the rise of social issues and the impact of policy changes on Ms Yang's generation. The rustication programme deprived them of opportunities for higher education and forced them to leave school at the age at which they should have been educated. During the large-scale layoffs caused by enterprise reforms since the mid-1990s[12] (see Chapter Two), many of them were laid off after having served their respective factories for more than two decades, and then found themselves uncompetitive in the job market because of their lack of education and other skills. In addition to the economic insecurity, they also faced *hukou* and housing issues that put pressure on relative relations. The surging housing market and China's long-standing *hukou* system prevented them from having access to more options to deal with their properties. In this case, the elderly lady Ms Zhang's situation reflected another common social issue in an aging society where the vast majority of urban elderly lives alone on their pension while unpredictable high medical costs might await them in the future.

### *1.3.2 Mediation: Reinforced Promotion of Harmony*

Economic reforms leave behind not only laid-off workers but also other disadvantaged groups such as migrant workers and urban elderly, who have fallen to the bottom level of

[12] The wave of layoffs started in the mid-1990s when a large number of state-owned enterprises and public assets were sold or contracted out to private investors.

society in the ongoing process of social stratification (Hand 2011). In the face of unemployment, the lack of resources, and financial pressures brought by medical and social welfare reforms, these citizens took collective actions to resist the reforms including social protests, petitions, or even anti-social activities (Cai 2002, Peerenboom and He 2009, Shi and Cai 2006)

Such discontent led to increasing instability in society, which became a crucial concern facing the government. To pacify these 'growing pains' of economic reforms (Minzner 2011), in 2005, the then Hu-Wen government launched the 'harmonious society' campaign, making efforts to reduce conflicts and emphasising the need for 'harmony' in society. The official promulgation of the People's Mediation Law signifies the government's determination to eliminate disharmony outside the court, as part of the overall goal of 'building a socialist harmonious society'. Mediation today serves more functions than to mobilise the masses to support party policies during the Mao era, and People's Mediators play a role of social control: resolving civil disputes by applying legal rules and policies, as well as preventing conflicts from becoming worse and eliminating the need for lawsuits and petitions (see Chapter Two for extended discussions on the development and changes of the mediation system).

Mass mediation has been carried out widely by mediators at sub-district offices[13] as a form of dispute resolution. It seems particularly useful for family disputes which often involve complex emotions, relationships, and/or reciprocal interests and thus are difficult to judge as 'right' and 'wrong'. As a Chinese saying goes, 'even an impartial judge will find himself worthless in hearing a case of domestic dispute' (*qingguan nanduan jiawushi*), implying the intricate relations underlying a dispute. For disputants like Ms Zhang and Ms Yang, a legal adjudication might well be an option, but it may inevitably jeopardise family relationships, and the time-consuming procedure and the legal costs could be beyond their affordability[14]. In this and many similar cases, mediation appears to be a useful solution that might help both parties to reach an agreement without harm to the

[13] The sub-district office is the sub-district's administrative agency. The sub-district is a form of township-level division, which is one of the smallest political divisions of the People's Republic of China.

[14] Most disputing parties on this show are not in a well-off financial situation, which will be discussed in Chapter Five.

relationship, which manifests the 'harmonious' spirit called for by the government at the time.

### *1.3.3 Social Role of Commercialised Media*

Speaking of the manifestation of 'harmonious' spirit, mass media are often seen as useful tools to achieve the government's goal. Meanwhile, changes and developments in the television sector have urged the need for innovative programmes that are close to life, especially since the turn of the millennium when reality television became a worldwide phenomenon (Ouellette 2014). Chinese television practitioners also started making reality-based programmes to attract audiences. Since circa 2003, confessional talk shows (*qingganlei jiemu*)—usually revealing ordinary people's conflicts and confusions in emotional life—have come to occupy a prominent position on Chinese television screens. Like that of commercialised media elsewhere, these profit-oriented programmes were keen to exploit viewers' voyeuristic fascination for sensational stories, which were later criticised as vulgar. In December 2008, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of China (SARFT) issued an order to regulate domestic television programmes, especially those confessional talk shows focusing on people's emotions (Zhang 2008). Chinese television makers are facing a dilemma: competing for viewers and generating revenues on the one hand, while meeting the censorship and propaganda demands of the government on the other (see Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion). In this context, *XLNJ* programme makers seemed to be cautious and ingenious enough when pursuing profit. Their strategy plays up to the authority by adopting a positive mediation approach, and at the same time still exploits personal issues to meet audiences' voyeuristic demands. It exemplifies the hybrid 'infotainment' approach that many other programmes in China also adopted (Hawes and Kong 2013) and thus finds itself a niche in the market.

Being the first television show that collaborated with the Shanghai Justice Bureau (SJB), the show sophisticatedly used this endorsement from the SJB to distinguish itself from confessional talk shows and increase its credibility. The SJB was also happy about this cooperation, as it provides a platform to promote civil mediation as an alternative to solve disputes. Noticeably, the show focuses on interpersonal disputes only, deliberately excluding sensitive issues that involve the Party officials or state-owned entities (see Chapter Five). By providing mediation as a solution to family chaos, the show attends to

various requirements by the government: adopting a positive attitude when dealing with family disputes as indicated in the SARFT Order 2008 (Zhang 2008), establishing an 'ethics building' model to fulfil media's social responsibility as required by the SARFT Directive 2011 (SARFT 2011a), and guiding the public opinion efficiently in order to promote harmony in society (Committee 2011). It integrates political needs with market needs in the sense that it provides solutions to contemporary domestic issues partly associated with commercialisation and rapid economic growth, emphasising Confucian principles of moral and family relations, which simultaneously responds to the government's overall goal.

As indicated above, the seemingly apolitical reality mediation show as shaped by both market and state forces is a site integrating complex ideological legacies and value-laden politics. Cases on the show have exemplified how 'the personal is often political' (Hanisch 1970) and how the private became public. The experience of Ms Yang's generation is not an individual's story, but part of the consequence of policy changes that reflects the political status quo. By watching only one single episode of such a programme, one can already identify complex social and historical causes for disputes such as increasing unemployment brought by the transformation of state-owned enterprise (*guoqi gaizhi*) and the 2008 global economic crisis, as well as rising commodity prices that exceed most people's finances.

## 1.4 Puzzles, Research Questions, and Aims

Mediation, a form of dispute solution that has been used by Chinese people for centuries (see Chapter Two), has now been successfully presented as a form of television entertainment. This combination of mediation and television gives rise to three latent tensions. Firstly, as a market-oriented programme, *XLNJ* tactically blurred the boundary between politics and entertainment. Being broadcast on the Entertainment Channel (*xin yule pindao*), the show is required by the higher hierarchical management level to incorporate entertainment elements with a supposedly serious mediation process. Making a serious and propagandistic mediation show with an entertaining purpose seems challenging enough for programme makers; as for the audience, how could watching arguments be entertaining? Secondly, it seems paradoxical to promote harmony by showing conflicts. On the one hand, the show proudly claims to have contributed to maintaining social stability; on the other hand, however, its very content exposes part of

the consequence of social and political changes resulting from economic reforms. And thirdly, in a nation deeply influenced by Confucianism, people would prefer mediation rather than going to court for the sake of saving their reputation, which is obviously contrary to the approach of publicised TV mediation. Exploiting people's privacy for higher profit seems to fly in the face of the traditional saving-face culture, of which one important virtue is that 'domestic shame should not be made public' (*jia chou bu ke wai yang*). Traditionally, people have typically tried their best to solve the disagreement on the smallest possible scale rather than revealing it to non-family members. Logically speaking, the mediation show is not consistent with this traditional value that people were taught. These tensions arise from entertainisation, social and political, and cultural aspects, that form the puzzle of this study and raise the question: how do programme makers and the audience come to terms with these tensions?

This study devotes attention to the nascent phenomenon of mediation reality shows during the beginning of this century, a topic that remains understudied to date. According to a search of the Chinese academic database, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI.net), there are in total 55 articles including journal articles, doctoral or graduate theses, conference papers, and newspaper articles on this topic during the six years period 2009-2014[15]. By and large, these published articles and unpublished theses mostly describe the general programme format and celebrate its popularity without substantive data from concrete empirical research. Among the limited existing Chinese literature sources, scholars have demonstrated obvious interests in mediation shows in terms of its effectiveness and legitimacy in resolving civil disputes (Li 2009, 2012a, Zhang 2011); its public and private discourse; its representation of individuals; and its consumerism (Li 2010a, Wu 2013). In the Western (English) academia, communication scholar Shuyu Kong and legal scholar Colin Hawes (Hawes and Kong 2013, Kong and Hawes 2014) have written articles analysing Chinese mediation shows in terms of their legal and moral discourse and relations to the grand mediation scheme in China (see Chapter Three). To the author's knowledge, no study has been conducted focusing on the programme makers nor the audience at the receiving end of the show. Hence, my

[15] The search result was obtained using a combination of two key words: television (电视) and mediation (调解). Then I checked the resulting list and only counted the number of relevant articles.

research aims to provide an insight not only into the context of the emergence and popularity of mediation shows but also the aim of such shows as seen by programme makers and mediators, and also to formulate a unique perspective to understand audiences' usages and perception of such programmes.

Many studies have been conducted on the transformation of Chinese media and the relationship between the state and China's media, both by Chinese and foreign scholars (see Chapter Two). However, not much can be found on Chinese audiences' perception of entertainment programmes, particularly the mediation TV show. This research aims to begin to remedy this limitation by carrying out a study on the audience using both qualitative and quantitative methods. My research focuses on the *XLNJ*, not only because it claimed to be the first mediation show, but also because it was the first television reality show that collaborated with the Justice Bureau. The mediation show provides the audience with a demonstration of the process of civil dispute mediation in a watchable and attractive format. Put differently, the mediation show brings together several elements from other television genres including talk shows (where a guest discusses issues with the host); reality shows (where a show presents actual and unscripted mediations of real events); and legal programmes (where a show tries to educate the public about legal solutions). The programme makers claim that their show pays considerable attention to the life of ordinary citizens sharing their concerns. They believe that the audience may be able to acquire a new way to resolve their disputes through the televising of the mediation process[16]. Furthermore, by collaborating with the SJB, *XLNJ* also institutionally mixed entertainment and the political, while at the same time it was seen by the authorities as a means to advance a harmonious society. Embracing various entertaining elements and multiple social and political functions in one programme, the show inevitably brings about contentions to both programme makers and the audience. Focusing on the production and the audience of the mediation TV show, my research probes into their perceptions of the intrinsic tensions of the show. In this sense, the general research question of my project is:

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[16] Interviewees #1, 3, and 6

How do programme makers and the audience come to terms with the potentially contradictory and conflicting entertaining, social and political, and cultural aspects of Xin Lao Niangjiu?

This general research question will be answered by the following three sub-questions, focusing on the particular show *XLNJ*. In order to explore answers to the general research question, it is necessary to understand what is the aim and goal of the mediation show. That is, as a reality show broadcast on the entertainment channel and collaborating with the local governmental institution, does its aim appear to be profit-oriented, educational, or propagandistic? This question would be best investigated through in-depth interviews with two groups involved in the production of the show: programme makers and mediators. Therefore, my first sub-question is: (1) *What do programme makers and official mediators see as the aim of Xin Lao Niangjiu?*

The aim of the show, be it political or commercial, may or may not be perceived by the audience. In other words, the audience at the receiving end of the programme may have a different understanding subject to their usage or perception of the show. Accordingly, this leads to my second sub-question: (2) *Why do viewers watch XLNJ and what gratifications do they (not) get out of it?*

After obtaining insights into the viewer's perception, I can then compare it with the goal established by the producer to check if the producer's political and commercial mission is achieved. Through the comparison of the programme makers' view and the audience's perception, I will also explore their attitudes towards the three tensions mentioned above, which constitute my third sub-question: (3) *What do local viewers get out of a mediation TV show that potentially conflicts with their cultural and political values?*

In order to answer these questions for my study, I have adopted a multiple method design taking advantage of the strengths of different research methods. The overall research was divided into two phases: one focusing on the programme production and one examining the audience. Figure 1.1 shows the relation of the two phases of this research (see also Chapter Four for research design and methodology).

## 1.5 Structure of This Dissertation

This dissertation consists of eight chapters in total. Chapter Two, the Background chapter, discusses a number of developments in China, to further contextualise the mediation show. In this chapter, I will firstly describe the structure and format of the mediation

show *XLNJ* and the major changes made to its content, in order to provide an idea of what the mediation show had been and what it is now. Secondly, I will discuss media transformation and commercialisation in China; in particular, the latent power of the entertainisation of the television industry. In this section, I explain the media environment in which the mediation show emerged and why it was innovative at the time. Thirdly, I will elaborate on the broader social and political context in China for the emergence of the mediation show, particularly social discontent following economic reforms. This section aims to answer in what way the mediation show responded to the authority's political appeal. Fourthly, I will discuss Chinese cultural traits, i.e. the saving face culture and influences from Confucianism and the Maoist eras, in order to explain why mediation on TV was controversial in these terms. And finally, I will discuss the development and effect of people's mediation in China, as well as its relationship with the central government's goal in building and maintaining a harmonious society. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a general picture of the social, cultural, and political context in which the mediation show sprung up.

Chapter Three, the Theoretical chapter, consists of four sub-sections. In the first, 'media system and politics', I will discuss the role of the media in authoritarian political regime models by reviewing major typologies of media and politics. This provides a clear idea of the relationship between mass media and political authority. In addition, I will review the literature on television and politics, particularly within the Chinese context. In the second sub-section, as the global commercialisation of the media industry has given rise to entertainisation, I will review the literature on entertainment and politics to elaborate how the two relate to each other. A review of studies on the entertainment industry and politics in China is also provided in this section to present a picture of relations between politics and entertainment in a transitioning Chinese context. Thirdly, I will discuss the main literature with respect to audience studies. Particularly, I will focus on the *uses and gratifications* approach, which provides the theoretical framework for my research. In addition, I will review the limited number of studies on audience effects in the Chinese context. In the last sub-section, I will discuss the limited existing studies on mediation shows. This chapter also elaborates the contribution of this study to academic fields including media studies and political science.

In Chapter Four, the Methodology chapter, I will discuss the methods used in the two phases of my research. In the first phase, I studied the TV production process, using

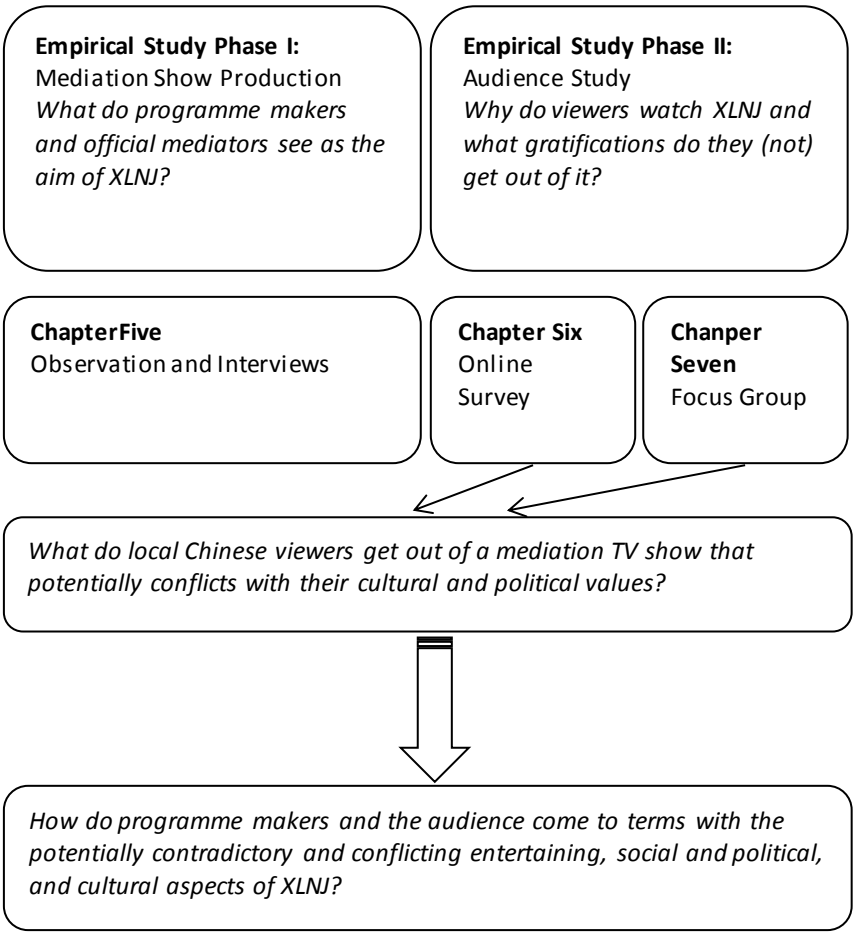
document analysis of visual and written materials, observation studies of the actual programme making, and in-depth interviews with major players in the production process. I also carried out an initial analysis of topics covered by the show in 2013 to identify which issues frequently occurred. The aim of the first phase is to disentangle the social and political contexts for the emergence of the mediation show as well as to explore the aims of the show as seen by production staff. In the second phase, the audience perception part, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was adopted. During this research stage, I performed an online survey to collect audience responses regarding their *uses and gratifications* of mediation programmes as well as their perceptions of the programme content in terms of its entertaining, social and political, and cultural aspects. Having conducted the online survey and the subsequent statistical analysis, I then proceeded to carry out focus group analysis. I utilised this not only as a tool to investigate potential explanations for contradictions that the survey findings suggested, but also to substantiate viewers' perceptions of the show. Both the online survey and the focus group helped to produce knowledge about the way audiences make sense of and use the mediation show in the different areas of life.

The Production chapter, Chapter Five, focuses on the actual production process of the programme makers. In this chapter, I will discuss the aims of the show as seen by different production staff, and the production of the programme, showing the dynamics and contentions behind this programme; and I will follow this by an analysis of cases broadcast in 2013 to provide statistics of the content of *XLNJ* and identify common issues on the show. Like most recorded broadcasts, the programme adopted a three-phase production: collecting issues, making the show, and editing the filmed material. While the core production team played a main role throughout the entire process, two other groups—the hotline reception team and the studio crew—were involved in the pre-production and production phases, respectively. I discuss how the decision-making during the three phases manifest the inclusive aims of the show as well as its contentions.

Chapter Six provides the survey data from the online survey conducted in May 2012: why people watched or not, the audience's specific *uses and gratifications* that they sought in the show, and how audiences perceive and interpret the contradictions embedded in the show in the entertainment, social and political, and cultural aspects. To conduct my survey, I selected web-based rather than paper-based questionnaires for logistical, efficiency, and economic considerations. Given the increasing population of Chinese web

users (513 million by the end of 2011), web-based surveys potentially allow for reaching a large population. The survey intends to provide a representative view of the online mediation show's audience and helps to set the scene for the subsequent focus group research.

**Figure 1.1 Overview of the empirical research (Chapters Five-Seven)**




Chapter Seven discusses the qualitative findings to further understand the audience of the mediation show. This chapter provides insights from focus group discussions, focusing on the viewers' attitudes, perceptions, and opinions towards the mediation show in terms of its content, mediating approach, and legal aspects. The focus group has been used to generate qualitative information and substantive explanations complementary to

the survey findings: why and how do people watch, have their opinions towards the legal system changed, and how do they come to terms with the contradictions and tensions between the entertainment, political, and cultural aspects of the show? Since the findings of focus groups cannot be generalised to an entire population, the main intention is to provide useful reference and to inform and contextualise the data of the online survey questionnaire.

In the final Conclusion chapter, I will review the entire research project and summarise the key findings from the two research phases—the production phase and the audience studies—and (try to) answer the research question that is guiding this dissertation. Based on the results, this chapter ends with implications related to entertaining mediation shows in an authoritarian regime. To close, the strengths as well as limitations of the study are reported, in addition to some reflections and directions for future research being provided.

# Chapter Two

# BACKGROUND

## 2.1 Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter One, the *Xin Lao NiangJiu* (新老娘舅, *XLNJ*) show successfully attracted a large audience with its novel format and became the focus of social attention at the time. The *Wenhui Daily* (4th October 2008) commented that mediation television programmes have significant social meaning by bringing typical cases of civil quarrels to the studio, triggering sympathetic responses from the audience. And *Shanghai Business Daily* (24th February 2009) referred to this type of programme as the real reflection of common social issues, and considered it as an extended subgenre of legal programmes. According to the 2008 Media Annual Report by CTR Market Research Co. Ltd., Shanghai *XLNJ* ranked No. 1 for general comments as well as influence on moral awareness (*Jiefang Daily*, 28th October 2008). Apparently, the local government and the propaganda department were quite satisfied with the approach of televised mediation that combined 'legal knowledge' with 'entertainment'. In 2008 and 2010, the Shanghai Propaganda Department and the Shanghai Social Science Association held two seminars titled 'Mediating Citizens' Disputes, Building a Harmonious Society' and 'Mediation: An Effective Way to Resolve Social Conflicts', respectively (see Chapter Five) discussing what makes *XLNJ* so popular and the possibilities to maximise the approach of TV mediation. In their opinion, being 'real' and 'close-to-life' are the key factors that attract the audience, and they also believe that the show manifests mainstream values that viewers sympathise with (see Picture 2.1 for a scene of mediation on *XLNJ*). It was not common in China that social scientists, university professors, legal practitioners, government officials, and programme makers would gather to discuss the phenomenon of a popular TV show. This publicised approval from the Propaganda Department soon gave rise to the proliferation of similar shows on channels across the nation, among which some were well known nationwide, such as Golden Medal Mediation (*Jinpai tiaojie)*, broadcast on the Jiangxi Satellite Channel, a provincial television network, and The Third

Mediation Room (*disan tiaojieshi*), broadcast on an educational and scientific channel of a Beijing TV station[17].

As every coin has two sides, before it received acknowledgement from the local government, the *XLNJ* show had been questioned by the audience (Ma and Xiao 2010) about the authenticity of the dispute cases, since they seemed too exaggerated to be real. During its early days, the show often faced a lack of volunteer dispute parties to accept mediation on TV, as people questioned the effectiveness of this new solution, while at the same time, they were concerned about 'losing face'. While the programme makers[18] insisted that all of the cases broadcasted were real stories, they admitted that they applied some 'dramatic touch' when editing in order to make it more entertaining to watch. The show played a dual role in that, on the one hand, it responded to the central call of building and maintaining a harmonious society, advertising '*don't worry about your household affairs, turn to us for mediation*' (*jiachangliduan buyongchou, doulai zhao women laoniangjiu*). The show claimed that it helped to promote social harmony by reducing the number of civil lawsuits, and its collaboration with the Shanghai Justice Bureau certainly had added value to its social influence. On the other hand, it pursued a large audience and commercial profits by presenting somewhat exaggerated and entertainised privacy to attract eyeballs.

*XLNJ* is broadcasted daily on the Shanghai Entertainment Channel. The length of the show had previously been 25 minutes. There was a host and a mediator, and a pair of dispute parties in each episode. The host and the mediator sat in the middle of the studio facing the camera, while the two parties to the dispute sat at the left and right side, facing each other.

The show began with the host telling the audience who is coming to participate and what the dispute is between them. Then both parties to the dispute would be asked to express their thoughts in turn. Usually, people would become very emotional when they told the host and the mediator about their painful memories. Sometimes, both parties would start to argue or fight with each other on camera. The mediator and the host would talk to the participants and ask them to calm down. The mediator would then attempt to resolve the conflicts by providing legal advice and using moral persuasion.

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[17] Beijing Science and Education Channel (北京电视台科教频道)

[18] Interviewees # 1 and #4 (see Appendix 4)

**Picture 2.1 A couple on the mediation show**

* A couple sit on two sofas facing each other, wearing a hat and a pair of sunglasses respectively to disguise their appearance. In the middle sit the presenter (lady in white) and the mediator.

**Picture 2.2 Audience commentators on the show**


* Four volunteer audience mediators sit on the show, observing the process of mediation. On the right side of the screen shows a slogan saying 'Treat others well; the Entertainment Channel and you are building harmony together'.

Now, the show has been expanded to 45 minutes and has moved to prime time, i.e. 18:30 from Monday to Saturday. In addition to the existing host and mediator, the show now also includes audience participants who observe and comment on the mediation in the studio. In each episode, there will be 6 volunteering audience commentators who participate in the mediation (Picture 2.2 shows audience commentators on the scene). They will be asked to take a position in the argument, and they can also provide suggestions. The participation of audience commentators has added interactivity to the show and also enlarged its entertaining function.

In this chapter, I further discuss the broader background in terms of the three aspects mentioned in Chapter One. In the following sections, I first discuss the social and political context of the mediation show—issues left over from the Cultural Revolution and side effects of economic reforms that have given rise to social inequality and discontent. This social and political background facilitates understanding about how the mediation show responded to the authority's political appeal by pacifying citizens' disputes. The second section lays out the history and development of mediation in China in three stages: mediation as a traditional dispute solution used since the Western Zhou Dynasty (1146BC – 771 BC) and influenced by Confucian philosophy; during the Maoist era, when mediation was used more as a propaganda tool; and today, when civil mediation has become an important part of 'grand mediation' (*da tiaojie*)—a scheme whereby people's mediation, administrative mediation, and judicial mediation would support each other to settle disputes in a peaceful way and make a contribution to maintaining social harmony (Li 2014b). Following this, I will talk about the marketisation and commercialisation of the Chinese television industry to explain how the mediation show occupies a niche position in the market to meet both its audience's needs and the political call for harmony.

## 2.2 Socio-Economic and Political Context

Since Party Chairman Deng's economic reform in 1979, vast socioeconomic changes have affected China. The reform aimed at rendering sufficient surplus value to finance the modernisation of the Chinese economy. A price-driven market economy took the place of the former administratively driven planned economy, which allowed some people to earn large amounts of money (Deng 1993). Rapid infrastructure constructions such as highways, airports, and ICT facilities have considerably improved people's living

standards and quality of life quality. In the late 1990s, as China prepared to enter the World Trade Organization (WTO), the CCP as China's only party also faced challenges as China's economy increasingly integrated into the world economy. Recognising that high-technology goods and services were crucial for the state to improve its economic power, the party leader at the time, Jiang Zemin, repeatedly emphasised the importance of technology and encouraged the development of the high-tech and information industries by providing a series of infrastructure improvements such as building up high-tech industrial parks. He also called to admit entrepreneurs into the party, which was seen as a gauged effort to maintain the relevance of the party in the global economy (Fewsmith 2002). Under the support of the CCP, the high-tech and information industries rapidly grew, and the private economy exploded by the beginning of the 21st century. While Chinese people benefited from the large material and financial progress, they gradually suffered from the consequences of these reforms, as well. During the same period, there was a huge cut in the labour force of the state-owned enterprises (SOE) and urban collectives; the official number of laid-off workers increased from 3 million in 1993 to 17.24 million in 1998 (China Labour Statistical Yearbook 1999, 441), but the actual number around that time could have been as high as 23 to 31 million (Solinger 2001, 672). In the 10-year period from 1993 to the end of 2002, more than 63 million workers were laid off from the SOEs between 1993 and 2003, accounting for approximately 44 percent of the state sector workforce (Hurst 2009, 16). The market economy in China resulted in growing frustration and social issues in four dimensions.

### 2.2.1 Four Dimensions of Social Conflicts

The Chinese government was aware of the negative consequences brought by the market reform. The CCP's Central Organization Department issued two books[19] identifying potential problems associated with the downside of the reform. One was published internally in 1998, *Talks of Research into Party Construction* (Committee 1998), that recorded a

[19] One of the books was published internally by the Party's Central Organization Department. Despite the fact that the survey failed to provide clear information on the number and exact types of people polled, I use the survey results here to shed some light on the social situation at the time. The other survey is from *Dangjian yanjiu zonghengtan*. The result of this survey was cited in Fewsmith (2002).

survey conducted by the State Committee for Economic System Reform[20]. The other was an investigative report published in 2001 titled *China Investigation Report 2000-2001* (Ketizu 2001). In addition to the studies conducted by the government department, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), standing alongside the government in the 'reform' process, has also focused on issues concerning the development of a welfare state. In 2008 and 2009, scholars from CASS published two books analysing the overall situation of social stability, relations between social groups, and social issues that affect social harmony[21]. One was the *Report on China's Social Harmony and Stability* (Li et al. 2008) based on the 2006 large-scale national public survey[22]. The other was the *Annual Blue Book of China's Society – Analysis and Forecast on China's Social Development Year 2009* (Ru, Lu, and Li 2009). Data from these four books suggest that most social conflicts resulted from the following four social dimensions in the 10-year period.

First of all, the increasing income disparity, including intra-regional and inter-regional gaps as well as inter-occupational inequality, is seen as one of the main sources of conflicts. As the 1998 SCRES survey indicated, 80.6 percent of respondents were dissatisfied with the growing gap between rich and poor, and this suggested that the idea of getting rich legally is widely ridiculed (Fewsmith 2002). Although the economic reform helped to lift millions of people out of poverty and achieved remarkable economic growth, the increasingly unequal wealth distribution has, at the same time, contributed to social unrest. Social analysts have conducted studies on cross-national development and warned that China's Gini Index had reached the zone of genuine danger of instability, where citizens are more likely to make their grievances heard through means such as illegal assembly and demonstrations, particularly when they have insufficient legitimate institutional channels (for instance, Zhang 2001). The widening income disparities existed between different industries, different occupations, different regions, and urban and rural residents. For instance, the top 10 percent of highest income families possess 45 percent

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[20] *Zhongguo guojia jingji tizhi gaige weiyuanhui*: this institution had previously been affiliated with the State Council of China. In 2003, it was restricted and merged into the National Development and Reform Commission.

[21] I use data from these survey here to provide a general idea of major sources of social conflicts and to shed some light on the social situation at the time.

[22] The survey was conducted during March to May in 2006, covering 28 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions, 130 counties (cities, regions), and 520 villages / neighbourhood committees, with a valid sample size of 7,061.

of the total urban wealth, while the families in the lowest 10 percent possess only 1.4 percent[23]. The Analysis and Forecast on China's Social Development Year 2009 indicated that in 2008, only 28.58 percent of respondents perceived income disparity as fair, a 11.93 percentage reduction from that in 2006.

Unemployment is another source of social unrest, which results from the consequence of structural reform of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). As an imperative procedure of the economic reform, SOEs were required to improve efficiency. Before reform, the socialist policy required full employment and job security (*tie fanwan*), which consequently led to overstaffing, little incentive to work, and low efficiency (Tang 2005). The streamlining policy in the post-Deng reform programmes (Mok 2000) has systemically eroded workers' benefits by a series of tough measures including collective lay-off, forfeiture of welfare for employees, and deterioration of working situations (Lee 1999, Tong 2006). Social welfare was reduced at the workplace, forcing people to rely increasingly on market forces and family self-support (Croll 1999). Consequently, a large number of middle-aged workers, the so-called '4050' group[24], have been laid off because of their lack of competitiveness in the labour market. According to the 1998 survey, 59 percent of workers and staff questioned said that their status has declined in China, and a total of 87 percent expressed considerable concern about the social situation[25] (Fewsmith 2002). Although efforts have been made to boost reemployment, such as 'Project 4050' (Su 2003), researchers have found that the disintegration of the collective economy and support for privatisation have directly or indirectly led to a decline in living standards. This holds particularly true for disadvantaged groups and regions, and the living

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[23] See, for example, a report from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (the former Ministry of Labour and Social Security) cited in a Xinhua report (Ma 2005). Another study revealed that the wealth distribution in China turns out to show an extraordinary disparity, whereby one percent of the population owns 70 percent of the total property. According a report published by the Chinese branches of the Boston Consulting Group on 17th October 2006, the top 0.4 percent of Chinese families (about one percent of the total Chinese population) owns over 70 percent of the nation's wealth; in contrast, in most developed nations, the top 5 percent of the families owns around 60 percent of the total wealth.

[24] Females over 40 years old and males over 50 years old (Fairbourne, Gibson, and Dyer 2007).

[25] The term 'social situation' was not clearly defined in the text, but Fewsmith presumably uses certain specific concerns to measure *social situation,* such as people's feelings about corruption and public order concerns, as well as more abstract expectations about whether life is improving or not. I presume that social situation includes their financial, housing, welfare, and wellbeing characteristics.

conditions for most laid-off workers and their families remain unsatisfactory (see, for example, Khan and Riskin 1998, Solinger 2001).

Thirdly, social unrest also arises from the tense nature of party-mass relations. According to the China Investigation Report of 2001, there were three reasons: an increased tax burden, the authoritarian work style of some cadres, and corruption among state officials (Tang 2005). Indeed, many instances of collective action stem from the abuse of power. By 1999, the number of state officials convicted of corruption had increased from 3,004 in 1993 to 4,436 in 1999, which was an 8 percent annual rise. As the 2001 report put it, 'some party and government departments and leaders put their department or individual interests ahead of the interests of the whole people and struggle with the people over interests', and such action 'shakes the faith of the masses in the party and government, thereby greatly weakening the ability of the party and government to resolve contradictions', (Fewsmith 2002). The situation did not improve in 2008, as the Report on China's Social Harmony and Stability indicated that 69.84 percent of respondents viewed 'cadres' as the group benefiting most from reforms in the past 10 years. With the image of the Party damaged by corruption, the resentment against state officials intensified.

Fourthly, economic reforms lay challenges in front of the state ideology, triggering uneasiness in society. On the one hand, the collapse of the Soviet Empire had inevitably shaken the belief in Marxism; on the other hand, certain Western market values such as individualism and a money culture had penetrated China, potentially influencing people's opinions towards socialism (Tang 2005). Contrary to the official ideology of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', 40 percent of middle-aged intellectuals saw China as working towards 'capitalism with Chinese style', as indicated in the 1998 report. Additionally, Chinese intellectuals yearned for political democratisation, as more than 33 percent of them believed that China should 'carry out general elections' and implement a 'bicameral, multiparty, tripartite' political system (Fewsmith 2002). The reform also brought great changes in youths' values. For example, before the reform, youths used to place their destiny into the hands of the government, while by the late 1980s, youths no longer exuded this same enthusiasm for serving the people, and it became unrealistic to assume that people would sacrifice everything for the state (Qing and McCormick 2011).

### 2.2.2 *Other Sources of Conflicts*

Apart from these sources of social conflicts, other sources triggering social unrests gradually manifested themselves in the recent decade. At present, an outpouring of grievances have originated from people who lost money in the stock market, pensioners, veterans, unemployed labourers, disgruntled peasants, and unhappy couples (Diamant 2005). A survey conducted by the China Society of Economic Reform in March 2007 (China Reform Editorial Office 2007) concluded the top ten social issues that required urgent solutions, which are mostly the same as those revealed in the Report on China's Social Harmony and Stability: high medical costs, unemployment (and few opportunities for individuals to make money), widening income inequality, corruption (tension between cadres and the masses), a secured pension system, arbitrary educational charges, inflation of (house) prices, public insecurity, the increasing gap between urban and rural populations, and severe environmental pollution. These issues reflected insufficiencies during the progress of economic reforms. Profits of reforms were not distributed equally, the mode of economic growth at the cost of the environment and high energy expenditures is unsustainable, and effective supervision of the government was absent.

The situation of social issues continued to deteriorate, especially when the impact of the financial crisis hit: unemployment rose, which seriously affected migrant workers as well as university graduates. Approximately 20 million migrant workers lost their jobs in 2009 (Xinhua News 2009), and 27 percent of those who graduated in 2008 failed to find a job (Huang 2009a). The lack of employment and income stability has caused government concern for social security and stability. Huang Huo, Xinhua News Chief at the Chongqing bureau, pointed out the risk of the unemployment problem: '…As employment difficulties and a high unemployment rate cause crises for individual livelihood, social contradictions will likely come to the foreground' (Huang, Guo, and Zhong 2010). At the same time, property prices in the housing market continue to rise in spite of control policies and regulations implemented by the central government[26]. The

[26] For example, the sales price indices of commercial residential buildings increased 14.5 percent year-on-year in the first two months of 2010 (National Statistics Bureau of China, 2010). This illustrates the further expanding momentum of China's economic recovery in the First Quarter of 2010. See *Annual Data 2010* for detailed statistics: http://www.stats.gov.cn/was40/gitjj_en_detail.jsp?searchword=house&channelid=9528&record=2 [Retrieved 9th June 2010]

average price of an 80 m² apartment in the centre of China's premier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai is at least 66 times as much as an employee's annual salary[27]. Apparently, the soaring house prices have made it difficult for most people to afford an ordinary home.

With respect to the rusticated youth generation (*zhiqing*) and their children, *hukou* is another problem they often have to confront in addition to housing issues. In most cases, they have to live with their extended family members in a cramped flat after returning to the city. Many of them feel that they are unwelcome when they move back. In some cases, the siblings of the rusticated youth are reluctant to welcome them back to Shanghai since their living condition is far from spacious to accommodate extra residents. In other cases where sent-down youth and/or their children were successfully registered to a relative's house, they feel resented by other family members who consider them as financial burden and disapprove of the amount of attention or money directed towards them. As for the rusticated youth, they feel that they do not deserve the resentfulness after all they have sacrificed not only for the country but also for their families: after 1970, their migration meant that siblings could stay in the city, and their children also made sacrifices. Also, education in the countryside was usually not as rigorous as in the big cities. As in the case of Ms Yang mentioned in Chapter One, *hukou* registration remains a critical issue for these families, which often gives rise to disagreements over property distributions.

Indeed, the quickly changing and unevenly developing market economy has disrupted the social fabric of the country and raised concerns with regard to a deepening wealth gap, unequal resource distribution, class stratification, and a decline in civic virtue (Sun and Guo 2013, 1-2). Growing up as the first one-child generation in the era of reforms[28], the post-80s generations benefit from economic growth, but are also affected by its consequences. As this generation has reached the marriageable and childbearing age, they are faced with a common social issue—distribution of properties, not only housing

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[27] Average per square meter (sq. m.) price in US$ of commercial housing in the centre of the most important cities in China is as much as US$5,449 according to the Global Property Guide Research. By contrast, however, the average monthly salary of employees was US$544 in Beijing, and US$481 in Shanghai according to the local statistics bureau (Shanghai Statistics Bureau 2009, Beijing Statistics Bureau 2009). (see also: Square Metre Prices - China Compared to Continent, from: http://www.globalpropertyguide.com/Asia/China/square-meter-prices Retrieved 9th June 2010)

[28] China's one-child policy, officially the family planning policy (jihua shengyu zhengce), was introduced in 1979, the same year when economic reforms started.

but also other property-related issues. As elsewhere, people in China tend to look for a spouse of higher status because of the habit of hypergamy (Blossfeld 2009, Glick and Lin 1986, Kalmijn 1998, Presser 1975, Qian 2012). The social norm of status hypergamy motivates especially men (and their parents) to purchase a larger and more expensive house or apartment to increase their competiveness in the marriage market (Wei, Zhang, and Liu 2012), since in Chinese culture the groom-to-be should provide a marital home for the couple. To protect their only child's interest in the marriage, many parents, unconsciously or deliberately, intervened in their children's marriage. Disputes involving disagreements about house property are often seen on TV. In response to this growing emphasis on material wealth in the marriage, the Supreme People's Court (SPC) issued its third interpretation of China's Marriage Law in 2011[29], addressing a number of marital property issues, which, however, trigger uneasiness in marriages, as most women worry about becoming homeless after divorce[30].

Meanwhile, the divorce rate has continued to increase in the recent three decades, which may partly influence the increase of social isolation and emphasis on individualism, and be influenced by the only-child policy, whereby young couples have four or more parents to support (Wang and Zhou 2010). Also, as China is witnessing an increasingly aging population, taking care of the elderly is an intensifying social issue. Ms Zhang's situation in the previous chapter is not uncommon in urban cities.

## 2.3 Politics of Harmony and Conflict Control

As discussed above, market economic reforms in the authoritarian regime have resulted in social tensions. Increasing social conflicts have garnered attention from the central

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[29] The interpretation took effect on August 13, 2011. An English translation of the third interpretation is available here: http://www.loc.gov/lawweb/servlet/lloc_news?disp3_l205402809_text (Retrieved 9th June 2010).

[30] Before the ruling, divorced couples could usually split their property evenly if they were not guilty of misconduct. Under the new interpretation of the marriage law, the person whose name is on the deed will keep the property, meaning that the other party might receive nothing. Since in Chinese tradition, usually the groom-to-be provides housing for the family, this means that his name is already on the deed. In this light, the ruling appears have a potentially enormous effect on gender-based wealth distribution in the country. Researchers of sociology worried that it would lead to 'a dramatic widening of China's gender inequality in wealth as a result of skyrocketing real estate prices in recent years' (Fincher 2014). See, for example, Li (2011) and Tatlow (2011) for detailed comments on the new marriage law.

government. In response to these social issues, in his report to the 16th Party Congress of Year 2002 (Jiang 2002), Jiang Zemin still placed much emphasis on the need to develop socialist culture and promote the ideology of *Marxism-Leninism*, *Mao Zedong Thought*, *Deng Xiaoping Theory*, and the important thought of *Three Represents*[31]. His successors, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, have put great emphasis on the construction and maintenance of a harmonious society in which public discontent is addressed and the stability of society is promoted. In October 2007, the 17th National Congress of the CCP was held in Beijing, where Hu Jintao stressed the importance of implementing the scientific concept of development and of building and maintaining social harmony and stability. The slogan 'Building a harmonious society' has become a hot topic and can be seen quoted everywhere. During a press conference of the 11th National People's Congress (NPC) in 2010[32], Premier Wen Jiabao acknowledged the existence of inequalities and stressed the importance of 'pro-people' policies:

> '…I believe equality and justice form the basis of social stability……There is no denying that we still face the problem of unfairness in many fields, including in income distribution and the judicial system. This deserves our close attention……In pursuing economic and social development, we should always give high priority and pay more attention to poor people and disadvantaged groups in our society, because they account for the majority of the population……China's modernization drive is not only about achieving economic prosperity. It also includes our endeavours to promote social equality and justice and enhance our moral strength…' (Ma and Xiao 2010)

To address the growing volume of litigation and increasing social disputes, the Chinese government in the recent decade promoted mediation as an effective approach. Mediation

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[31]The Three Represents is a guiding socio-political theory put forward by Jiang Zemin in 2000, which refers to what the Communist Party of China stands for: It represents the development trends of advanced productive forces; the orientations of an advanced culture; and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people of China.

[32] Wen Jiabao, Premier of the State Council, met journalists from home and abroad and answered their questions at a press conference of the Third Session of the 11th National People's Congress (NPC), on the morning of March 14, 2010 in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing at the invitation of Li Zhaoxing, spokesman of the NPC Session (China News Report 2010).

has been used for a long time in China under the influence of Confucian philosophy, which has become a tradition of conflict control. In the following section, I will further discuss the tradition of mediation as a means of conflict control and the development of the mediation institution in China.

### 2.3.1 Tradition of Conflict Control through Mediation

When disputes occur in people's daily life, parties to a dispute in China usually have adopted mediation rather than litigation as their primary means of resolution. China apparently has one of the longest histories in the world of using initialised mediation practices to resolve conflicts in both rural and urban parts of the country (Barnes 2007). Actually, mediation had long been widely adopted among Chinese citizens before the government officially legitimised the mediation system. In Chinese traditions, people valued 'face' (*mianzi*) as well as interpersonal relationships so much that going to court would be their last choice, as it signifies falling out openly and would inevitably 'lose' their 'face' and jeopardise relationships (*sipo lianpi*). Therefore, Chinese people tend to keep domestic conflicts to themselves and solve them internally rather than going to court. Telling others your family issues was regarded as a face-losing action, because this brought about gossip and stirred up trouble for yourself and your family members. Of complaints or grievances, only a very small proportion finally became legal cases (Diamant 2005).

Among complaints of grievances, only a very small proportion have finally turned to filing legal claims (Diamant 2005). In most cases when disputes occur, people would adopt mediation instead of litigation as their primary means of resolution. While people demand impartial justice, they do not want to put their faces and relations at stake. Besides, many civil disputes are similar to the aforementioned example, in that they are complicated and involve entwined interpersonal relations. Resolving disputes through the process of people's mediation not only results in the least impact on relations, but sometimes even improves the otherwise deadlocked personal relations. In Ms Yang and Ms Zhang's case, they recalled how they were looked after by the other during the early years. Therefore, people's mediation maintains interpersonal relationships while providing reasonable solutions to disagreements.

Mediation is influenced by both Confucianism and Maoism. I will discuss in the following sub-sections the traditional usage of mediation in villages, the propaganda tool

during the Mao era, and the contemporary adoption of mediation as a lawful way to solve various disputes.

### 2.3.2 Mediation as a Traditional Option to Solve Disputes

As a main means of dispute resolution, mediation has been culturally sourced from and profoundly influenced by Confucian ideology. Confucius' thoughts, laying emphasis on the importance of a well-structured society and the standardised relationships within that society (Tang 2005), have penetrated deep into Chinese social culture. Central to Confucianism are five terms of conduct that depict individuals' responsibility with respect to relationships in society*: Zhong* (loyalty) – people should be faithful to the ruler and support the ruler all the time; *Xiao* (filial piety) – children should take care of their parents; *Ren* (humanity and benevolence) – one should be kind-hearted and sympathetic to one's husband or wife; *Li* (ritual and politeness) – politeness and compromise between sisters and brothers; and *Yi* (righteousness and sacrifice) – people should help their friends by self-sacrifice (Tang 2005). The book *The Analects* recorded Confucius' thinking of personal morality, self-cultivation, the practice of government, correctness of social order, justice, and sincerity. In a broad sense, Confucianism pursues a high realm of truth, goodness, and beauty of human morality, where the value of interpersonal collaboration, harmony, and stability are highly treasured. In this light, litigation is seen to oppose these ideals. Confucius' attitude towards litigation was incisive:

> The Master said, 'In hearing litigation, I am no different from any other man. But if you insist on a difference, it is, perhaps, that I try to get the parties not to resort to litigation in the first place.' (The Analects, Book XII, Verse 13, translated by Lau (1992)

One Confucian verse well known among the Chinese people was 'Harmony is most precious' (*he wei gui*) (The Analects, Book XII, Verse 13, translated by Lau (1992)), which underlined the importance of the maintenance of harmony in all aspects of social life. Accordingly, one could conclude that the Chinese insistence on conflict avoidance is inherent in its persistent desire for harmony (Goh 2002, 25). 'Harmony' here contains varying levels of meanings, such as 'being at one with one's immediate environment' (van der Sprenkel 1962), encouraging people to put oneself in somebody else's shoes, and compromise to reach an agreement. Therefore, bringing a dispute to the judicial domain of a court was regarded as harmful to the harmonious relationship among people, and a practice one should be ashamed of.

In addition to the cultural explanation to account for the prominence of mediation, there are also geo-demographic factors. Migration was minimal in China's early days. People would live in the same village within the same neighbourhood throughout their lives. They knew each other, and when disputes arose between two parties, other people would come to help solve the problems. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, especially after the launch of the economic reform, increasing growth in population mobility occurred. Large numbers of migrant workers left their rural villages and towns to make money in urban areas, which has given rise to various disputes and conflicts.

### *2.3.3 Mediation in the Maoist Era*

In Mao Zedong's era, the use of mediation was reinforced and became more political, with mediation being used as a method to strengthen the regime's legitimacy (Lubman 1999, Peerenboom 2002) by educating people and implementing the policy of CCP. At that time, the People's Republic of China had just been established and the authorities needed to stabilise and strengthen their regime's legitimacy. Accordingly, the goal of mediation was not only to resolve disputes among the people, but also to strengthen the people's patriotic observance of the law and to promote the internal unity of the people (Minzner 2006, 304). The Party had already articulated a policy of resolving civil disputes before their assumption of power in 1949. They tried to set up mediation organisations to involve the masses in settling disputes under government supervision (Cohen 1970). Based on the experience in governing the mediation of civil disputes, the CCP devised in 1954 a mediation system and promulgated the Provisional General Rules of the People's Republic of China for the Organization of People's Mediation Committees[33].

The goal of the mediation in Mao's time, as stated in the Rules, was to 'promptly resolve disputes among the people, strengthen the people's patriotic observance of the law, and to promote the internal unity of the people in order to benefit production by the people and construction by the state'[34]. The Party encouraged the masses to join the basic level of the mediation committees, because they would be familiar with local conditions

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[33] Promulgated on March 22, 1954, in 'Collection of Laws and Decrees of the Central People's Government' (*Zhongyang Renmin zhengfu faling huibian*), 1954, pp. 47-48, cited in Cohen (1970)

[34] Rules, Art. 1. Translated and cited by Cohen (1970)

and could solve disputes quickly. Using mediation committees to solve disputes ensured, to a large extent, that government officials have sufficient energies 'to concentrate on leading the people in the various kinds of production and construction' (Cohen 1970, 304).

One stark difference between the Maoist ideology of mediation and the Confucian ideology was that, apart from the emphasis on regime legitimacy, the former expanded the meaning of mediation to include a range of interventions including adjudicatory actions taken irrespective of the will of the litigants (Huang 2009b, 203). During the Cultural Revolution, all courts were closed down, and many impartial and well-trained judges and lawyers were persecuted because of their so-called bourgeois liberalisation tendencies (Lubman 1999). The justice system was revived gradually in the 1980s and 1990s.

### 2.3.4 Mediation in the 21st Century

While China has been experiencing social and economic progresses, various kinds of social conflicts have also been emerging. Meanwhile, the lack of financial and legal support, along with other factors, caused the decline of mediation and the rise of lawsuits in the 1990s (Halegua 2005). The government made efforts to improve the policy environment and the institutional structure of people's mediation. To address the increasing social disputes and reverse the descending trend of mediation usage, a series of documents and decrees were issued by the SPC and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ)[35], emphasising the importance of people's mediation's role as the 'first line of defence' to solve civil disputes before they deteriorate. Seeing people's mediation as 'the first line of defence' to 'guarantee social stability', and as 'a constructive force', and 'a protective force'

[35] These documents include 'Opinions of the SPC and the MoJ on Further Strengthening the Work of People's Mediation in the New Era' (issued by Ministry of Justice 2002), 'SPC Provisions on Several Issues in the Civil Mediation Work of the People's Courts 2004' (*Zui Gao Renmin Fayuan Guanyu Renmin Fayuan Minshi Tiaojie Gongzuo Ruogan Wenti de Guiding*), 'Several Opinions of the SPC on Further Promoting the Positive Role of Mediation in Lawsuits in the Building of a Socialist Harmonious Society 2007' (*Zuigao Renmin Fayuan Guanyu Jin Yi Bu Fahui Susong Tiaojie Zai Goujian Shehui Zhuyi Hexie Shehui Zhong Jiji Zuoyong de Ruogan Yijian*), and 'SPC Several Opinions on Further Implementing the Work Principle of 'Giving Priority to Mediation and Combining Mediation with Judgment' 2010' (*Zui Gao Renmin Fayuan Guanyu Jin Yibu Guanche Tiaojie Youxian, Tiaopan Jiehe Gongzuo Yuanze de Ruogan Yijian*).

in building and maintaining a harmonious society[36], these decrees, issued by the highest level of the government and the Party, manifest the government's determination to restore social stability and strengthen Party power.

In the most recent decade, mediation has become a preferred mechanism for resolving a broad range of disputes, both private and public law issues, preventing them from escalating into full-scale public dissatisfaction or 'large group incidents' (*quntixing shijian*) disrupting social stability (Halegua 2005). A 2004 MoJ report indicates that each year People's Mediation Committees prevent over 50,000 civil cases from escalating into criminal matters, as well as stopping nearly 100,000 group fights (Wang 2005). Nationwide, the average yearly number of mediated cases rose from 6 million in 2004 to 8 million in 2013[37].

As social conditions have become increasingly complex, many dispute cases are seen to require more coordination from government institutions than the people's mediators' approach of mixing the law with social pressure and moral persuasion. The SPC 2010 decree urges people's courts to promote people's mediation, judicial mediation, and administrative mediation[38] to establish the working system of 'Grand Mediation' (*da tiaojie*) – a comprehensive stability maintenance and dispute resolution mechanism. It emphasises integrated, top-down stability maintenance practices and a synthesis of Party, government, and social resources to solve complex disputes at the basic level (Hand 2011, 143-144). The web of grand mediation was expected to play a

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[36] See Article 1 in the 2007 SPC decree. In the same document, Article 5 stipulates that local courts should make efforts to mediate disputes involving group interests that require the cooperation of government and institutional organs; collective disputes; difficult and complicated cases in which disputing parties stand emotionally against each other; disputes that involve unclear or inapplicable legal rules; or sensitive cases receiving high attention from society.

[37] Data reports by an MoJ official Wang Jue (2005b) and see also a report from the MoJ official website (Qin 2013).

[38] Official definition of mediation types (as defined in China's Judiciary 2002):

*'People's mediation*: Mediation by People's Mediation Committees outside the court.

*Judicial mediation*: Mediation by a court of law in civil and economic disputes and minor criminal cases inside the court. For marital cases, inside-court mediation is a necessary procedure. Whether or not to seek judicial mediation is for litigants to decide. Mediation is not a necessary procedure. A court's mediation document is as valid as its verdict.

*Administrative mediation*: This can be outside-the-court mediation by 'grass-roots' governments such as a township government in ordinary civil disputes, or outside-the-court mediation by government departments in compliance with legal provisions in specific civil disputes, economic disputes or labor disputes.'

proactive and reactive role to prevent potential conflicts from developing into violent or extreme cases.

China's legal scholars seem be concerned that by introducing government intervention into the otherwise autonomous mediation system, it might consequently challenge the judicial authority and undermine China's still-underdeveloped legal institutions (Zhou 2007). Government officials and legal practitioners believe that legal reform improves the mediation organisations. Zhou Yougeng, the director of the Shanghai Baoshan Justice Bureau, indicates that people's mediation is not mandatory, disputing parties choose people's mediation voluntarily, and they can always turn to litigation if mediation fails to solve their problem. Additionally, he points out that in China, adjudication is not the best way to solve most civil disputes where who is right and who is wrong is not always black and white; as he questioned, 'do you really think that only a clear judicial decision is fair to dispute parties, and really solves the dispute?' (Wang, Tang, and Wang 2010).

Indeed, during China's transition to a full market economy, the situation for its legal system was complicated. While some scholars criticised the legal reform in China as 'turn against law' (Gallagher 2006, Minzner 2011), others would agree with Zhou that there are other ways to solve civil disputes. One such option that emerged in recent years was the mediation show. Being itself an outcome of channel restructure due to media marketisation, which I will discuss in the next section, mediation shows have integrated this institutional legacy as a means to solve family disputes, responding to the government's call for harmony.

## 2.4 Media Marketisation and Control of Content

Ever since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the mass media have been playing the role of the mouthpiece of the party. Hence, the development of the media and communication system has received great attention from the national government. The leaders of the Chinese Communist Party have recognised the value and importance of using the mass media as an effective means to communicate the crucial ideas to their 'revolutionary objectives' from the very beginning (Hong 1998, 41). As Mao Zedong stressed, the mass media have four tasks: they 'should propagandize the policies of the Party, educate the masses, organize the masses, and mobilize the masses' (Lu 1979, 45).

Since the initial economic reform in 1978, China has witnessed a rapid and successful move towards a market economy. Media marketisation in the Chinese context refers to the deregulating, commercialising, and (partial) privatising of media outlets (Stockmann 2013, 7-8). Both press and television reflect this move in terms of changes in structure, ownership, and media content. In the past three decades, the role of China's media has been transformed from government mouthpiece to profit-oriented propaganda units. That is to say, party ideology is being expressed through the marketise d media, whereas the media's profit-making privilege was predicated on fulfilling their political functions (Lee, He, and Huang 2006). On the one hand, media received more autonomy in their economic operation and became increasingly market-oriented (Wu 2000, Zhao 1998). On the other hand, it was clear that the Party would continue to control the content of the media in detail through the Central Propaganda Department and its local branches at all levels (Tang 2005). Let us look at this in more detail.

### *2.4.1 Transformation of TV Industry*

The traditional institutional television system in China was previously a 'Four Levels' framework—central government, province, prefecture or municipality, and county—that was established in the 1980s, meaning that each level in the hierarchy assumes the responsibility to manage and administrate the television stations within the same level (Zhao and Zhou 2006, 113). At that time, China still applied the planned economy system; in other words, news media had to rely entirely on national appropriation. It was the regional government that allocated funds and social resources to its subordinate television stations monthly or quarterly (Li 2005, 3). TV programmes during that period were made mainly for the purpose of publicising the policy and establishing the leaders' authoritative and trustworthy images among the public. This 'Four Levels' framework had four advantages: firstly, it could guide the public opinion effectively; secondly, it could ensure the safety of broadcasting, i.e. not be interrupted, especially when some unexpected incidents occurred; thirdly, it was effective for extending the broadcasting coverage; and fourthly, it was good for integrating the internal resources (Lee, He, and Huang 2006). Undoubtedly, the 'Four Levels' system spurred the development of China's television industry.

However, under such a system, a huge waste of the resources was inevitable. There appeared large amounts of repetitive production and transmission among television

stations at each level, which consequently resulted in increasing costs. Lacking the financial resources to create or to purchase programmes, most TV stations found it difficult to operate as usual, not to speak of making profits. On the other hand, at the end of the 1970s, the reform of the Chinese economy began, when Deng Xiaoping established the 'socialist market economy' and advocated for opening China to the global market (Hong 1998, 57). Facing the pressure of financial shortage and the opportunity of economic reform, China's television industry entered an urgent crisis of transformation.

Since the 1980s of the last century, with China's economic reform and openness, Chinese television has experienced a series of significant transformations. The operating mode of the television industry has changed from a purely government-sponsored mode to a more marketised and industrialised mode. The embrace of a free-market economy gave rise to a proliferation of media outlets and a diversity of information formats in the media system.

Taking the television industry in Shanghai as an example, on January 25, 1979, Shanghai Television (STV) asked for the Shanghai Municipal Government's permission to broadcast TV advertisements (Xie 2006, 28). Three days later, on the Chinese New Year's Day, STV broadcasted China's first television advertisement—a 90-second commercial of a medicinal wine produced by the Shanghai Medicinal Material Company. Later that same year, in November, the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee officially allowed the news organisations to broadcast advertisements (Hong 1998, 147). This indicated that China's media had entered the advertisement period. Since then, China's television institution has found another source of finance beyond state subsidies.

With the growth of the revenue from advertising, the government gradually reduced the financial allowance for its television station (Lu 2002, 85). In 1986, STV introduced the nation's first English news programme and held China's first international television festival, the Shanghai International Television Festival (SITF). Before the economic reform, the central propaganda department had monopolised television programme imports. Even major cities like Shanghai had been prohibited from importing television programmes (Hong 1998, 60). It was at the third SITF that TV programmes were traded for the first time. Subsequently, increasingly many foreign programmes were imported by Shanghai Television. Following STV, other regional and local television stations started to look to other countries as programming sources (Hong 1998).

In the 1990s, the first cable television station and the first commercial television of the country, Shanghai Cable Television (SCTV) and Oriental Television (OTV), respectively, started broadcasting in Shanghai (Hong 1998, 148). Oriental Television was also the first TV station that, free of the government-allocated funds, assumed sole responsibility for its profits or losses. As Jiang Zemin (1996) once commented when he inspected the People's Daily newspaper in 1996: 'under the socialist market economy system, news media should be good at propaganda as well as in business management'.

### 2.4.2 *Structural Changes of Shanghai Television*

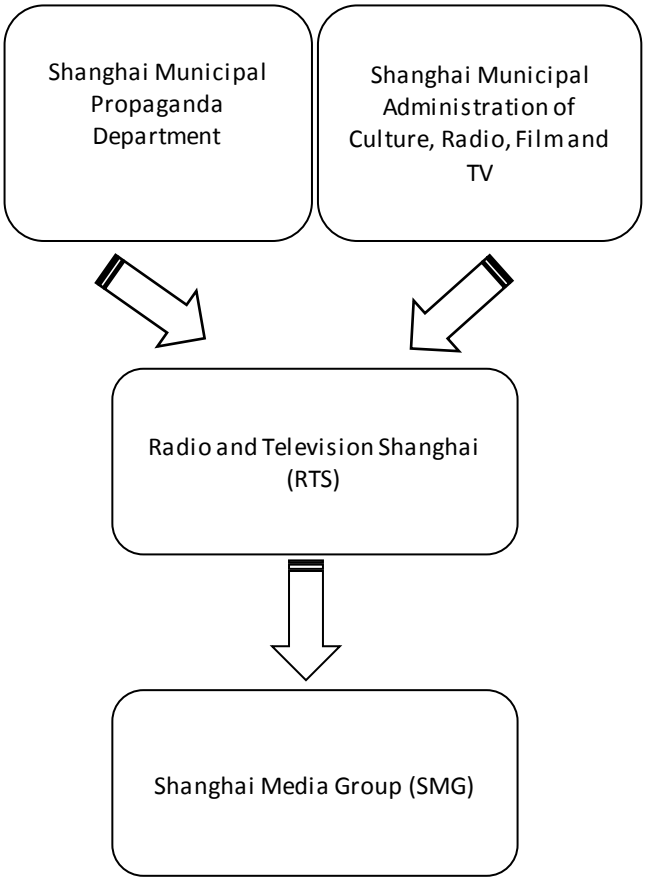
With the implementation of nationwide media marketisation, the Chinese television sector has been adjusting its structure and ownership to adapt to the market. Before China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), media conglomeration—merging different media institutions into one (usually state-owned) larger and stronger group—was implemented across the nation as a preparation for the cross-nation market competition brought about by globalisation. As a result of commercialisation, Chinese television has generally become a government business with a binary structure that comprises a political administrative hierarchy and a business vehicle (Zhong 2010b, 17)[39]. For example, a diversified multimedia company, Shanghai Media and Entertainment Group (SMEG*, Shanghai Wenhua Guangbo Yingshi Jituan*), owned by the Propaganda Department of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, was founded in 2001[40]. In the same year, the Shanghai Media Group (SMG, *Shanghai Wenhua Guangbo Xinwen Chuanmei Jituan*) was formed under the SMEG as the result of a merger between the STV, OTV, People's Radio Station of Shanghai, and East Radio Shanghai. SMG was

[39] Taking an economic approach, Zhong's (2010b) study of three largest media conglomerations in China—among which one is at the national level, and the other two are at the provincial level—is based on publicly available information. He confirms that China Central Television, Hunan Satellite Television, and Shanghai Oriental Satellite Television all assume the binary hierarchical structure and that the three listed companies, China Television Media Ltd, Shanghai Oriental Pearl (Group) Co. Ltd, and Hunan TV and Broadcast Intermediary Co. Ltd, are related to CCTV, OSTV, and HSTV, respectively.

[40] SMEG is a multimedia television and radio broadcasting, news, and Internet company. The company employs around 5,200 people, with capital assets of RMB 11.7 billion. The group operates in television, film, and radio broadcasting as well as newspaper and magazine publishing, content production, internet, and new media services.

in charge of operating and administering local television and radio production and broadcasting.

**Figure 2.1 Structure of Shanghai Media Group since its transformation in 2009**




On 21 October 2009, in response to broadcast industry restructuring plans laid out by SARFT, the Shanghai Media Group split into two legal entities: Radio and TV Shanghai (RTS) and Shanghai Oriental Media Group (*Shanghai Dongfang Chuanmei Jituan*). This move symbolised the separation of production and broadcasting of content in the Shanghai broadcasting industry. RTS retained the operational structure of the former SMG, and was managed by the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture, Radio Film and TV *(Shanghai Wenhua Guangbo YIngshi Guanliju*) under the guidance of the

Shanghai Municipal Propaganda Department. News operations and the broadcasting platform remain at RTS and are not commercialised. The Oriental Media Group continues to use the English acronym SMG, and is in charge of all non-news-related assets and departments. RTS is comprised of news, technology, and public broadcasting, while the new SMG, with its shares held by RTS, is more market-oriented, in charge of advertising, production, distribution, and investment. Li Ruigang, president of SMG, stated that the move is a trend for the TV industries to react more efficiently and quickly to the market (Zheng 2015). Figure 2.1 provides a general picture of the structure of RTS and SMG since the 2009 transformation.

Clearly, the marketisation and conglomeration did not change the nature of media ownership. Both SMEG and SMG remain as government-controlled businesses, and they are also staffed by a number of party cadres and professionals who hold official positions at the municipal Propaganda Department or other government offices (Zhong 2010a). They must fulfil missions allocated by the central and municipal governments before they can seek to make profits from various commercial activities.

Moreover, there has been a gradual commercialisation of media in the People's Republic of China, with the result that media organisations survive by stimulating consumer demand. For these media entities, advertising has been indispensable, and it could bring substantial profits (Pan 2000). Their business model, particularly their dependence on advertising revenues, to some extent has given rise to a commercial culture that is often apolitical, but may nonetheless challenge the traditional relationship between political authorities and the public (McCormick and Liu 2003).

### *2.4.3 Influence of Control and Content*

Did media commercialisation liberalise media content and weaken media control by the authorities? This question generated debates among scholars regarding the implications of media reform for the state's authoritarian regime. They converged on the significant importance of liberating the market in an authoritarian party-state, and diverged on the role of the commercialisation in liberalising the political control over the media. One the one hand, some scholars celebrated the power of commercialisation in liberalising political discourse and facilitating public supervision of the CCP (Chan 1993, Hao, Huang, and Zhang 1998, Yang 2013, Zheng 2007). In their opinion, media commercialisation in China imposed structural pressure on the CCP to decrease its ideological persuasion and

allow more autonomy over media operation, and Chan (1993) believed that 'such erosion of the CCP's control over ideology will intensify'. Similarly, Hao, Huang, and Zhang (1998) argued that 'the development of a market economy invariably weakens the political control of the Communist Party or vice versa', and as a result, 'a non-state controlled public sphere is emerging'. Zhong and Wang (2006) have indicated that the commercially driven content somehow weakens political propaganda on Chinese television.

On the other hand, scholars studying the transformation of different media sectors in China have noted that the state retains the ability to consolidate and control media power through marketisation (Esarey 2005, Stockmann and Gallagher 2011, Stockmann 2013, Zhao 2008). The party-state has actively incorporated market forces and initiated media conglomeration for the purpose of facilitating media capitalisation and preparing for global competition. But meanwhile, the authority is enhancing political control of the media content (Zhao 2000). The market mechanism has improved the effectiveness of the media's role as the party's mouthpiece and 'eyes and ears' (Gordon 1997). Therefore, the media, particularly television, still have to play the role to respond to the central call.

It seems that Chinese media are faced with a dilemma related to being a commercialised unit and a propaganda tool at the same time. As Lee (2000, 89) suggests, the process of 'commercialization' has done more than giving rise to alternatives to the state-run media: it has also changed the form and content of the state-run media programming. Taking the Chinese television industry as an example, marketisation brought by economic reforms has led the media into a competitive marketplace, making them compete for profit. The separation of production and broadcasting undoubtedly pushes TV production towards a more diversified development, meeting the various demands from audiences. Just like other major media production companies in the country, television is owned by the state but at the same time is profit-driven. Under the impact of marketisation and commercialisation, television content has shifted from political to pure entertainment-based content (Keane, Fung, and Moran 2007, Shoesmith 1998). For example, *Super Girl*, a popular talent show from Hunan Satellite TV, swept national screens. Following its success, increasingly many entertainment programmes of various styles have proliferated on provincial and local TV stations. In this light, the inherent entertainment function of television that Postman (1985) observed, is said to displace public attention not only among the audience in the U.S. but also in China (Shoesmith 1998, Weber 2002). Gradually, commercialisation seems to bring about the

popularisation of media content, transforming the role of the media from a tool of the party to move in a more market-driven and entertainment-oriented direction.

Meanwhile, the Party continues to control the media using various methods, including institutional, political, and financial approaches. Television stations, like other media sectors in China such as newspapers, remain as public institutions (*shiye danwei*), meaning that they are tied to the state and under the control of SARFT and the Propaganda Department (PD). The appointment of the conglomeration management rests with the government. And from a financial perspective, corporate organisations are under the direct control of government businesses that hold the controlling share of the listed stock, which means that they are not genuinely exposed to the capricious commercial world of the capital market (Zhong 2010a). Therefore, the state maintains its capacity to exert control over the media organisation, personnel, and editorial process through administrative institutions and most importantly the PD (Stockmann 2013, 73). The combination of various control methods can be exemplified by Shanghai Television below.

The two managers of the conglomeration in Shanghai, Ye Zhikang, Head of SMEG, and Li Ruigang, CEO of SMG, were appointed by the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee. Their appointments at least nominally gave the centre supervision over key management positions. As a result, managers of television and radio stations selected by Ye and Li were nearly all Party members, who were able to produce popular programmes not politically sensitive in nature (Esarey 2005, 31). As shown in the Figure 2.1, RTS owns, controls, and manages the new SMG (*taishu, taikong, taiguan*), meaning that it has the power to make decisions over major issues, appoint and dismiss leaders, censor and edit programme content, and guide the direction of cultural safety and publicity. According to Zhu Hong (2009), director of the general office as well as spokeswoman for SARFT, RTS has established control organisations such as the Programme Editorial Committee, News Centre, etc. to enhance its capability of guiding public opinion. Clearly, CCP holds that the media are still their mouthpiece and continue to exercise forms of media censorship (Zhao 1998). In the case of television transformation in Shanghai, it has been clearly listed that the first rule of the media transformation is 'sticking to the Party spirit' (*dangxing yuanze*); its function of the Party's mouthpiece remains unchanged (Tong and Zhong 2011). Specialised departments controlling and censoring television content were created to ensure that the rules are followed. For instance, programmes were 'examined' before

publication or broadcast, to receive certification that they do not contain any counter-revolutionary content (Lynch 1999).

Consequently, Chinese media must not only remain the mouthpiece of CCP, but financially support themselves as well, despite dealing with different forms of censorship and the elimination of state financing. Similar to any other marketised media, Shanghai Television then expanded to cater to a vast range of different tastes for advertising revenues. Media content is sometimes a result of negotiation and bargaining between profit-seeking media companies and the government's effort to maintain control (Tang 2005). The market-oriented media have to chase profit by attracting audiences and playing up to the central government's appeal at the same time. There are instances where commercialisation worked to enhance propaganda as a commercialised outlet in an attempt to enhance programme makers' interests by aligning them with those of the government (Zhong 2001, Zhong 2010a). Seen in this light, transforming civil mediation into a reality entertainment show appears to be a typical and representative case, considering that mediation is not only a legacy of tradition due to its long history, but is also used as an effective propaganda method adapted by the CCP.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Within the specific context of China—the inherent Confucian culture of mediation and the frequently emphasised political goals, as well as the industrial reform of television—the basis was established for fostering the emergence of a special pattern of social communication that aimed to please both the audience and the authorities. Driven by internal and external factors, the first mediation TV show, *XLNJ*, appeared on television from early 2008. While it seems apparent that various topics were discussed on the show, ranging from family conflicts to social issues, these cases and the participants were selected carefully in order to avoid sensitive issues that would disturb social stability and play up to the audience's 'voyeuristic demand' at the same time (see Chapter Five).

This chapter has discussed the broad background of the *XLNJ* show. Three aspects—the political context, media marketisation, and deep-rooted mediation institution—formed the broad environment for the emergence of mediation reality shows. The market reform within the authoritarian regime brought the country not only economic growth but also side-consequences that needed to be pacified. As the government decided to address these social issues with the call for 'harmony', the media

have appeared to seize the opportunity to achieve market success during the media reform by promoting mediation—the traditional approach of conflict control—to respond to the needs of both government and the public.

It seems that the media in an authoritarian regime more or less maintain their 'mouthpiece' role as a means to secure their position in the market. Given the complex relation between the media and politics, which I will discuss in the next chapter (Chapter Three), the role of the media in an authoritarian regime is swinging like a pendulum. On the one hand, the market reform brought changes to its role by becoming more audience-oriented and more entertainised. On the other hand, however, the Chinese government, like governments in other authoritarian regimes, attempts to maintain its control. The following chapter will review studies on media, the political regime, and relations between television entertainment and politics. While most studies are conducted in Western democratic regimes, the available number of studies on Chinese (entertainment) media might suggest a different relationship with the government in an authoritarian system. The audience, as the receiving component of the entertainised media, may also have different perceptions in Western and authoritarian nations, which will also be discussed in the next chapter.

# Chapter Three

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## 3.1 Introduction

In the context of economic reforms, media commercialisation, and regime changes, mediation reality shows find a niche in the competitive marketplace playing up to both the audience and the government. My research looks into the production of mediation shows and the audience's perception of intrinsic contradictions triggered by this particular format. Studies on media and politics can generally be divided into three main categories in terms of media sphere (Oates 2008): the production, content, and audience of a media product. In this chapter, I will firstly discuss the role of the media in authoritarian political regime models by reviewing early typologies of media and politics. Particularly, I will review the literature on television and politics, and I will additionally include the Chinese context. Media in authoritarian regimes, according to normative theories, should subordinate their freedom to the obligation of carrying out the goals of the party or the government. Some scholars are concerned that commercial profits might surpass other responsibilities in a competitive marketplace, leading to the convergence of entertainment and politics, which would generate political apathy among citizens and jeopardise democracy. Others have argued that TV entertainment programming or popular culture in general plays a role to encourage rather than suppress citizen engagement. Empirical studies in China have revealed a different situation from those in the West. By and large, entertainment media seem to pursue profit by appealing to the audience and appeasing the authorities.

Secondly, the global commercialisation of the media industry has given rise to entertainisation, which also happens in China. Mediation reality shows emerge as an outcome of media commercialisation and entertainisation. While the collaboration with the Justice Bureau symbolises the endorsement from the local government, there are contentions between media entertainment and politics. Accordingly, in this section, I will

review the main literature on 'entertainment and politics', elaborating how they maintain an uneasy relationship.

The contentions between entertainment and politics raise questions related to how the audience perceives such programmes like mediation shows. As a result, thirdly I will discuss the literature on audience studies. Particularly, I will review the *uses and gratifications* approach to provide a theoretical framework for my research. In addition, I will review the limited number of studies on the audience in China. Finally, being aware of an increasing academic interest in mediation shows, or more generally, life-counselling programmes[41] (*bang mang lei jiemu*) in China, I will briefly review recent studies in this field.

## 3.2 Media System and Politics

### *3.2.1 Media and Political Regimes*

One classic work examining the relationship between media and political structures is the *Four Theories of the Press* by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956). The authors believe that mass media 'takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates' and reflects the 'basic beliefs and assumptions that the society holds' (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956, 1-2). Based on this notion, they proposed four ideal models of mass media-political relationships: the Authoritarian, Soviet Communist, Libertarian, and Social Responsibility models. According to the authors, the Authoritarian model requires the media to work for the state's needs; the Soviet Communist model holds that media must serve the benefits of the working class and support the Marxist-Leninist ideologies; the Libertarian model provides full autonomy to the media so that any kind of opinions can be aired freely; and the Social Responsibility model suggests that the media should cover all parts of society responsibly and include the public interest (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956). These four models describe an ideal or typical way for a media system to perform under certain political and social conditions.

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[41] Life-counselling programmes are used by Chinese television professionals to refer not only to mediation shows but also to others that provide help or solutions to people's difficulties in life.

Established in the Cold War era, the *Four Theories* has its root in Western liberalism and bi-polar thinking, and the 'global expansion of the U.S. model of privately owned for-profit media' (Nerone 1995, 8). The boundaries between the models are vague. In fact, Siebert and his co-authors themselves indicated in the introduction that the four theories can be summarised as two basic types: a libertarian tradition of free press and an authoritarian one of censorship, while the Social Responsibility and the Soviet Communist models are their respective variants. Nerone saw this inadequacy of classification as the fundamental conceptual problem with *Four Theories*: 'it defines the four theories from within one of the four, classical liberalism because it is specifically within classical liberalism that the political world is divided into individuals versus society or the state' (Nerone 1995, 21). In addition to the questionable typology, the *Four Theories* has also been criticised for its narrow scope of selected media, neglect of developing countries, oversimplifications of media systems, ethnocentric perspective, and inconsistent structure (see Curran and Park 2000, Hardy 2010, McQuail 1994, Merrill 2002, Nerone 1995).

Building on the *Four Theories* approach, subsequent normative theorists sought to redress the deficiencies and extend the framework to address a wider range of regions. For example, Merrill and Lowenstein (1971) renamed the Soviet Communist model as the *social-authoritarian*, attempting to depict the political situation more appropriately. Given the rise of independent states in Asia and Africa after World War II, Hachten and Hachten (1981) and McQuail (1983) have suggested that new categories should be added alongside the liberal and Marxist variants. Hachten and Hachten (1981, 169-170) relabelled the original four models and introduced a *revolutionary media theory*[42], defined as illegal and subversive mass communication utilising the press and broadcasting to overthrow a government or wrest control from alien rulers. McQuail (1983) added two new categories: a *democratic-participant theory* for stronger models of democracy and a *development theory* for countries at lower levels of economic development and with limited resources, in which the media play the role of carrying out or supporting positive developmental programmes and accepting restrictions and instructions from the State.

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[42] In 1981, Hachten proposed five dimensions: Western, Communist, authoritarian, revolutionary, and development or third world.

The media should subordinate themselves to the requirements of political, economic, social, and cultural development.

Some authors moved further away from the original four theories and developed their own. Altschull (1984, 1995) proposed an alternative typology. He identified three models for media systems: *market* – where media operate without external intervention, *Marxist (communitarian)* – where media serve according to the desire of the authority, and *developing (advancing)* – where media operate as the partners of governments. Picard (1985, 67) has proposed another media theory, the *Democratic socialist* model, in which the media should 'provide an avenue for expression of the public's views and to fuel the political and social debates necessary for the continued development of democratic governance'. This model emphasises that media should have autonomy from economic and governmental power and legitimises state intervention when necessary.

These subsequent schemas, however, are subject to the same deficiencies of the original normative models and face new challenges such as media proliferation, media convergence and digitalisation, and transnationalisation (Hardy 2010). They have paid little attention to media practices in other socialist states such present-day China. They are grounded in the four theories, which as Hallin and Mancini (2004) say, is like 'a horror-movie zombie' that 'has stalked the landscape of media studies…for decades beyond its natural lifetime, and it is time to give it a decent burial and move on to the development of more sophisticated models based on real comparative analysis' (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 10). Thus, they contend that we should take a close look at actual connections between media and the state. They adopt a 'most similar system' design that focuses on only a set of relatively comparable cases to assess whether 'systematic connection between political and mass media structures' can be identified (Hallin and Mancini 2004, xiii). Based on their analysis of 18 Western democracies, they identify four key dimensions that characterise national media systems including *development of the media market*, *political parallelism, journalistic professionalism*, and *the role of the state*. Their conceptual framework also consists of five political system variables: the *role of the state*, *type of democracy*, *type of pluralism*, *degree of rational-legal authority*, and *degree of pluralism* with reference to the political contexts of media systems. Using these sets of dimensions, they explore relationships between the political system and media structures, and propose three models of media and politics: a *Polarized Pluralist Model,* where media are linked to party politics, weaker commercial media, and a strong role of the state; a *Democratic Corporatist Mode*l, in

which commercial media coexist with media outlets tied to organised social political groups and the state has a small but active role; and a *Liberal Model* in which media operate according to the principles of the free market and there are no formal connections between media and politics, and minimal state intervention occurs (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

The theory of Hallin and Mancinis is a major framework to understand complicated connections between political and mass media structure. While their theory has extended and repudiated the *Four Theories* tradition, it also shares similar limitations of the earlier normative models. One inadequacy, among others, is the problem of classification—to what extent can the suggested framework, based on 18 Western democracies, be used to understand variations between different systems in the rest of the world, located within different cultural, social, and political contexts?

### 3.2.2 China's Media System in a Global Context

These theories developed in the West are less applicable to media systems in the non-West, such as Asian countries. Many of the philosophical underpinnings of Western theories have to be redefined to fit Asia's cultural and philosophical heritage (Yin 2008). How to fit Asian countries, particularly China, into the debate about media and polities? Ostini and Ostini (2002) seek to answer this question by incorporating the individual journalists' autonomy into political and social structural factors, contending that China's media system is authoritarian-conservative compared with Hong Kong's authoritarian-liberal system. However, their analysis is of a micro-level that fails to avoid the problem of undue generalisation (Hardy 2010).

Another effort to remedy this deficiency has been undertaken by Yin (2008), who proposes a *two-dimensional model* of freedom and responsibility. This model integrates the key Asian cultural emphasis on the concept of responsibility into the Western preoccupation with freedom. The Asian concept of responsibility, as Yin argues, is the result of both Confucian moral influence and socio-economic realties of Asia. She uses 'Free' and 'Responsibility' as two dimensions to measure the relation between media and state. According to her, Chinese media are categorised as 'Responsible but not free'. The responsible part manifests itself in the rise of news coverage on officials' corruption and the media's attention to those living at the 'grass-roots'.

According to Yin, the Western models are embedded in individualist cultures that value independence, personal freedom, and rights of the individual. The Asian ones emphasise being responsible and loyal to the state and family rather than being free. Whereas most Western societies are egalitarian, emphasising public participation, Confucian societies are hierarchical and vertical, believing in meritocracy instead of democracy, and where equality in human relations is a foreign concept. Unlike the media in Western countries that takes pride in being a watchdog of the government, in Confucian societies, people are expected to be obedient and to respect the government so as to keep social order, and social stability takes precedence over civil liberties (Yin 2008).

She says that cultural values are important to both the West and the East, and bringing this concept to the dimension of responsibility makes the typology applicable not only to the Western but also to the Asian countries. Her models facilitate the understanding of Asian media systems in a global context. However, Yin's models seem confusing when applying them in practice, as she distinguishes her concept of responsibility from that of the social responsibility media model (Jakubowicz 2010). It is also not clear which model fits Chinese media. While many media organisations can be classified as *Free and not responsible*, the forces from developing technology and market competition are, as Yin herself says, 'pushing the Chinese press toward more freedom and responsibility'. It might not be easy to clearly pigeonhole the Chinese media system, which, as early scholars concluded, is characterised by 'commercialization without independence' (Chan 1993) and 'professionalization without guarantees' (Yu 1994).

After reviewing these theories on relationships between media and politics, the present author does not attempt to classify the Chinese media system into a certain model. Rather, these previous theories shed some light on how political systems may have impact on media structure and may shape the media content. But normative theories are not sufficient to understand the specific media in China. In fact, the changing media in a changing China has been a recent interest for empirical scholars (Shirk 2010). They would agree that media in China play a very important political role, which is often seen as instrumental to regime stability (see, for example, Street 1997, Womack 1987, Zhao 1998). Media were not considered a politically independent or neutral enterprise. Rather, as Hu Yaobang, a former General Secretary of the Party, expressed in his speech at the Central

Committee Meeting[43], the purpose of the media was to serve as the 'mouthpiece of the party' and the media 'are all under the leadership of the party and must follow the party lines, principles and policies' (Hu 1985). The party used to hold comprehensive control over the media through legal, financial, and administrative means, prescribing that: 1), the news media must accept the party's guiding ideology as their own; 2), they must propagate the party's programmes, policies, and directives; and 3) they must accept the party's leadership and adhere to the party's organisational principles and press policies (Zhao 1998).

With the start of the economic reform, advertising has become the main funding source for television, and thus the party lost one of its means of control. Television stations began to produce market-oriented programmes so as to pursue profit through their advertisement income. As Zhao (1998) writes, 'The new types of stations counterbalance the lopsided political and propagandist orientation of the official model and give fuller play to the economic, cultural and entertainment functions of broadcasting'. China's entry into the WTO has no doubt put pressure on the domestic media, as they would be faced with challenges from a more open marketplace. Under marketisation, the Chinese television industry has been undergoing significant transformations in programming, production, ratings, and policies, making relations between visual media and politics more complex. These transformations, as Chu (2008) contends in her study of Chinese television documentaries, are not only changes in style 'but generic shifts that reveal substantial modifications in the attitude of the Chinese government towards the media under market pressure…these changes are indicators of a society in a gradual process towards "democratization" and regime modification, a process in which the media are playing an increasingly significant role' (Chu 2008, 49). According to her, the 'democratic' potential of the television programmes is beginning to be realised in a variety of ways.

At the same time, television in China, particularly national television, maintains its political function. Chang (2003) compared the coverage of presidential summits on Chinese and U.S. national television, i.e. China Central Television (CCTV) and The American Broadcasting Company (ABC). While both national television networks

[43] Held on 8 February 1985

featured diverse reports of the events, the presentation on CCTV seemed to be couched in a specific framework to favour the central authority and institution controlling Chinese society and the news media (Chang 2003, 134). For example, CCTV covered the Beijing summit of the year 2003 in a way that motivated a sense of national pride or nationalism (see Chang, 2003, p. 135).

Indeed, in this 'patriotic nationalism', the media and the authorities collaborate in reinforcing regime legitimacy. As Lee (2003) states, Communism no longer exists in China, but the Communist Party remains, attempting to maintain its monopolistic control over coercive power and resources. 'The propaganda-weary Chinese do not trust fraudulent Party rhetoric; they treat it with indifference, ridicule, or situational compliance to protect their self-interest. The only exception occurs when national sovereignty is at stake: the populace joins forces with the regime to achieve "patriotic nationalism"'(Lee 2003, 2).

In the context of commercialisation, Chinese media have been developing in a more market-oriented direction. Yuezhi Zhao (2012) indicates that the commercialisation is constrained, and that it has not undermined political instrumentalisation in any substantial way. She contends that:

> 'In China, although the party media model remains "structured in dominance", it is perhaps useful to move beyond a single model to understand Chinese media institutions and practices in the dynamic and creative tensions among political instrumentalization, commercial instrumentalization, professionalization, and pressures for popular participation in the era of digitalized and socialized communication' (Zhao 2012, 172).

Indeed, with the economic development, the role of the media in China has also been slightly changing. China's media still please and follow the authority; as in the Soviet theory, the mass media are subject to state control and serve the party. Meanwhile, the media have no longer been financed by the government, which has cut their subsidies, leading them to pursue profit in the market through programmes that attract large audiences, notably entertainment programmes.

So far in this section, I have elaborated previous works on media and political regimes, describing different frameworks for a media system to perform under different political and social conditions. As the economic reform proceeds in China, the role of the

media has changed in response to the shifting political environment. It suggests a different relation between media freedom and government control from what is assumed in early theories established in Western democracies. The economic reform also brought about marketisation and commercialisation, which have led the media towards the direction of entertainment. Accordingly, in the following section, I will review and discuss the relation between entertainment and politics.

## 3.3 The Role of TV Entertainment in Politics

The debates about entertainment in relation to politics are dominated by two main arguments concerning whether televised entertainment plays an undermining role to modern democratic practices. The pessimistic debates can be traced back to the last century. The 'crisis of democracy', raised in the widely influential Trilateral Commission's Report of the United States, Europe, and Japan[44] (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975), has triggered a wave of anxiety about civic engagement and media. This 'crisis' has inspired much research and debate, among which the media malaise thesis is dominant. The malaise theory was introduced by political scientist Michael Robinson (1976), who contended that people who rely for information on television only are victims of 'video malaise', suggesting that the viewing of televised public affairs programming results in an increased sense of malaise and hinders civic engagement, trust in government, and public participation in politics.

The media malaise theory is by and large based on two core assumptions: firstly, the process of political communications has a significant impact upon civic engagement; and secondly, this impact has a negative direction (Norris 1998). Though the malaise theory is also applicable to other media, television—a medium seen as inherently suitable for entertainment and detrimental to democracy (Jones 2005)—has been frequently targeted. Scholars and critics repeatedly lay the blame for increased interaction between politics and entertainment at the feet of this particular medium. For instance, Robert

[44] In this report, the authors Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joni Watanuki expressed concern about the crisis of democracy that the capacity of the state would not meet the demands from democratic government. They criticised that the rise of critical and autonomous news media has challenged government authority in many post-industrial societies, leading towards the 'crisis of democracy'.

Putnam (2000) judges watching entertainment television as a factor isolating people from social activities and consequently deteriorating social connections. For Neil Postman (1985), the problem with television is *epistemological* – TV is a dangerous way of knowing and understanding politics. For him, only the print media can convey information objectively and rationally. Television offers merely amusement, entertainment, and distraction. It has made entertainment the 'natural format for the representation of all experience' and 'the problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter, but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining' (Postman 1985, 87). Roderick Hart (1994) focuses on the *phenomenological* problem that television has transformed the way politics is experienced. He writes that television disclosure may give people an illusion of closeness with politicians and may allow us to feel engaged or empowered politically. However, he argues that such false and temporal feelings make people feel informed instead of being really knowledgeable about politics. In addition to Putnam, Postman, and Hard, numerous scholars also argue that entertaining politics on television has increased disaffection among citizens, as measured by homogenised opinions, political apathy, declining voting rates, loss of political trust, and declining confidence in government[45].

Yet, other scholars hold a more optimistic opinion towards the relations between entertainment and politics, arguing that the role of entertainment is not necessarily 'all' bad. Based on their empirical evidence, they challenge the television malaise thesis from various angles. For instance, Pippa Norris (2000) argues that news programming in conjunction with political party activities is not responsible for civic malaise; on the contrary, television viewing can be an activating force to strengthen civic virtue and encourage political interest, efficacy, and knowledge. She explains that politically engaged people are more likely to watch television news, and the exposure then reinforces these characteristics in a virtuous circle. Similarly, Kees Brants (1998) contends that the premises of an 'infotainment scare' are problematic. He has reviewed studies on television news and politics and suggested that television journalism in Northern Europe is by and large serious and deliberative. Together with his colleague Neijens (Brants and Neijens 1998), they have carried out a content analysis of 16 programmes prior to the 1994

[45] See Newton (2006) for a detailed and helpful overview of media malaise literature and arguments.

elections in the Netherlands, and found that a talk show may be more informative than a news programme in terms of reflecting a candidate's qualities, and that programmes on private channels are not necessarily more entertainment-focused in their portrayal of politics than those on public channels.

Furthermore, Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) argues that the malaise thesis is supported by the elites as a means to position themselves above the ordinary masses who enjoy popular culture. She says the authors of the video malaise discourse 'implicitly proclaim themselves as the authorities who are able to see through the tricks television plays upon "us", and who will guide us out of the darkness' (van Zoonen 2005, 15). She connects fandom with citizenship, arguing that they share three similarities in terms of process: first, both fan communities and political constituencies come into being as a result of performance; second, their cognitive and participatory activities are very much alike; and third, they both rest on emotional investments.

In the same vein, Jeffrey Jones (2005) proposes that citizenship can be engaged in and encouraged through televised popular culture. He carried out an analysis of humorous political talk shows in the light of Dahlgren's (2000) six pre-conditions that include discussion, practices, values, knowledge, affinity, and identities. Jones (2005, 196) contends that television 'provides a public space where preconditions of citizenship can be cultivated, displayed, affirmed, and maintained'.

Apparently, these scholars accept the key role that television plays in democracy, and they also acknowledge that the boundary between entertainment and politics is increasingly blurred. By and large, these studies mine news and information programmes or political talk shows for case studies. The process of politics being 'communicated in order to acquire the interest and involvement of its external referents, the average citizens' (van Zoonen 2005, 7), might well happen through television genres other than conventional political communication. Indeed, the seemingly apolitical content of television entertainment might have a powerful influence on the way we define socio-political problems and embrace ideology (Parenti 1992). An increasingly important genre in the global context is reality television.

The genre of reality TV is relatively young, with scholarly discussions on it having become rich and varied only in the recent decade. Early studies have attempted to define the genre, where Hill (2005) argues that there is not one definition but many competing definitions of the reality genre. She explores the various ways in which television

practitioners, academics, and audiences categorise reality TV and finds that the genre is hybrid. For her, the defining characteristic and key attraction of the reality genre is 'the capacity to let viewers see for themselves' (Hill 2005, 55). She indicates that audiences use a fact/fiction continuum to evaluate the 'reality' of the reality television. In her early study of *Big Brother* viewers, Hill (2002) suggested that audiences are tired of performative documentaries. They want to see programmes that capture someone's story behind the scene or those filmed with hidden cameras, where people have no opportunity to act before the camera. Audiences possess a seemingly paradoxical and critical attitude towards reality TV: they criticise the genre for being 'mindless entertainment' and meanwhile criticise themselves for watching it (Hill 2005).

Valentina Cardo (2011) uses *Celebrity Big Brother 2007* as a case study to investigate how this reality show encourages audience engagement around issues raised in the programme. She sees the show as a forum where vertical political communication takes place. The result of her content analysis suggests that the show drew upon the same language and procedures as politics and thus promoted 'a type of participation that counted as political' (Cardo 2011, 242). Such participation is articulated through the viewers' voting action to support or oppose a contestant, by which viewers/citizens can influence the outcome. Another empirical study of *Wife Swap* by Todd Graham (2011a, Graham 2011b, Graham and Hajru 2011) suggests that reality shows can trigger political discussion on the Internet. He investigated the use of expressives (humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgments) in viewers' online discussions, and contends that active audiences engaged in political talk are often deliberative. These studies of popular reality shows in the U.K. or the U.S. provide evidence that entertainment reality television can play a positive role in enhancing civic engagement. In the context of China, as I will review in the following paragraphs, reality television or entertainment more generally plays a subtle role in terms of engaging audiences and enhancing the existing power structure.

### 3.3.1 Entertainment and Politics in China

While there have been book-length studies on reality TV in the Western context, studies from non-Western perspectives are scarce (Meng 2009). In this section, I will review studies on reality TV and also those on entertainment and popular culture in general.

Addressing entertainment and reality television in China, the unprecedented popularity of *Super Girl* in 2005 created a fever phenomenon among Chinese television viewers. The show bears much resemblance to Fox's *American Idol* in the U.S. or ITV's *Pop Idol* in the U.K. (Meng 2009). At its final contest, it attracted approximately 400 million viewers, and the figure exceeded that of the China Central Television New Year's Gala earlier that year (Macartney 2005, Yardley 2005). Its voting mechanism allows audiences to participate in the judging process by sending messages from their mobile phones to vote for their favourite girl, which was seen as a 'democratic' exercise in mainland China and triggered heated debates on its social impact and political implications (Cui 2005, de Kloet and Landsberger 2012, Lynch 2005, Macartney 2005, Marquand 2005, Yardley 2005, Zhou 2005). It seems to have been unprecedented in the history of Chinese television that an entertainment show would invoke discussions on politics, democracy, and citizenship (Meng 2009). In academia, Meng (2009) attempted to examine the *Super Girl* phenomenon through the lens of media spectacle, and she reveals that in the process of the production, participation, and interpretation of the spectacle, three myths were reinforced:

> 'First, "free" market being an antithetical force against state control and delivers "people's" choice. Second, media offer privileged access points to reality and authenticity, which are further enhanced by the interactivity that reality TV allows. Third, shows like Super Girl provide a platform for people to practice democratic deliberation and governance in an authoritarian society' (Meng 2009, 268).

She argues that these myths reinforced and naturalised the existing power structure. Jian and Liu (2009), however, argue that talent shows like *Super Girl* make use of contestants and audiences as cheap labour to generate profit. Fans and participants are charmed by a certain amount of apparent democracy during the singing contests and they are symbolically paid in 'dream-fulfilment', which the authors call a 'democratic entertainment commodity' (Jian and Liu 2009, 525).

Hartley (2007) sees talent shows like *Super girl* as 'politiciotainment', combining reality with plebiscite. Such talent shows have a voting mechanism similar to that in the abovementioned *Celebrity Big Brother*. Hartley's finding is to a large extent consistent with Cardo's, that the entertainment industry has discovered that people love to vote,

sometimes even without expecting instrumental outcome (Hartley 2007, 51). While viewers in Western democratic regimes can support or disdain a contestant through voting action (Cardo, 2011), Hartley's (2007) findings indicate that the craze of voting in the Chinese context can, but will not necessarily, amount to democracy.

While talent shows remain popular on Chinese television, another genre, the dating shows have proliferated on provincial as well as local channels following the success of *If You Are the One* (*feicheng wurao*) since 2010. The show *If You Are the One* became popular not only because of its innovative format and humorous conversations, but also because it taps into Chinese people's attitudes and anxieties about love, relationship and marriage (Sun, 2015). The show features blunt and sometimes controversial social commentaries made by young female contestants on the stage, which both shock and resonate with the audience. These remarks reflect the prevailing materialistic values in the society[46], which undoubtedly incurred the accusation of promoting 'incorrect social and love values such as money worship' (SARFT 2010). Behind the concerns of corrupted moral standards, as Sun (2014) argued, the government panics for the reason that such programmes may intensify conflicts between the rich and the poor and consequently 'accentuate' social tensions.

The above studies illustrate how seemingly apolitical entertainment can be a field for political warfare. These entertaining reality shows actually provide a prism through which to understand the subtle relation between entertainment and politics in China. While talent shows like *Super girl* benefited from their 'plebiscite' mechanism that 'apparent democracy' has been strategically used as a means to establish booming viewership and to generate great profit, dating shows like *If You Are the One* achieved high ratings for its controversially blunt content presenting undisguised materialistic values. It is undoubtedly true that profit is what the show's producers care about, whereas in a specific media environment in China, entertainment inevitably connects to politics in various degrees. Both *Super Girl* and *If You Are the One* became the target of SARFT's series 'Clean up the Screen' campaign (Bai 2014), which manifests the government's determination to maintain control over media content. In the eyes of the government,

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[46] One notorious example is a remark made by Ma Nuo, one of the contestants, who said that 'I would rather cry in a BMW than smile on a bicycle'.

entertainment programmes shall not only pursue their own interests, but also fulfil the mission to 'provide moral education in the form of entertainment' (*yu jiao yu le*) (Sun 2015, see also Chapter Five).

## 3.4 Television Audience Analysis

The above studies probe into complex relations between entertainment and politics in different cultural and political systems in Europe and the U.S., and some studies exist on the case of China. Authors examine the role of entertainment by studying the phenomenon, the production, and/or the discourse. How audiences perceive or make use of the media is another important component of this research. In this section, I will particularly review the *uses and gratifications* approach, which provides a theoretical framework for my research.

In order to understand why people watch mediation programmes and what people can get out of watching that sort of programme, it is necessary to research audiences and explore their interpretations of media content as well as their uses of certain messages transmitted through television. *Uses and gratifications* theory (U&G) has been developed to explain reasons why individuals seek particular types of mass media programming and what gratifications they may receive from the attendance or use of it (Fuller 1996). *Uses and gratifications* theory focuses on the audience and explores 'what do people do with the media?' (Katz 1959). U&G tends to explore the motivation and needs behind the audience's use of the media, adopting a sociological and psychological perspective.

Early scholars and researchers have taken different approaches to research into audiences. For example, Jensen and Rosengren (1990) summarised five traditions of audience research: studies of effects; *uses and gratifications*; literary criticism; cultural studies; and reception analysis. McQuail (2005) saw three main schools of audience research: the structural approach, which focuses on the media system and the social system as primary determinants; the behavioural (functionalist) approach, which devotes attention to individual needs, motives, and circumstances; and the social-cultural approach, which emphasises the particular context in which the audience is located.

Blumler (1979) summarised three motivations of audiences and their effects:

> 'First, we may postulate that cognitive motivation will facilitate information gain... Second, media consumption for purposes of diversion and escape will

> favour audience acceptance of perceptions of social situations in line with portrayals frequently found in entertainment materials... Third, involvement in media materials for personal identity reasons is likely to promote reinforcement effects' (Blumler 1979, 18-19).

As a functionalist approach, the *uses and gratifications approach* is helpful in providing an open framework for this research, as its origins lie in the search for answers to why people use media and for what purpose. The first *uses and gratifications* research can be dated as early as the 1940s when scholars were interested in investigating people's uses of different radio programmes and newspapers (McQuail 2005). This approach has five assumptions: 1. The audience is active; 2. The initiative in linking gratification and a specific medium choice rests with the audience member; 3. The media compete with other sources of satisfaction; 4. Many of the goals that media employ can be derived from data supplied by the individual audience members themselves; and 5. Value judgments about the cultural significance of mass communication should be suspended while audience operations are explored on their own terms (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973, 510-511).

After their study of different radio and TV programmes in Britain, McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) proposed four main gratifications that people can get out of media use: (1) *Diversion*: escaping from personal problems and routine; emotional release; (2) *Personal relationships*: using the media for companionship; social utility; (3) *Personal identity*: using the media as reference for identifying; gaining reinforcement for values; and (4) *Surveillance*: seeking information that facilitates the understanding of the world.

Based on this general approach, Livingstone (1998) explored TV audiences' usages of soap operas. In her book *Making Sense of Television*, she categorised and summarised that audiences have different uses of and gratifications from television. She argued that some people watch TV as a daily routine and discuss the issues on TV with other viewers. Some people watch TV soap operas mainly for entertainment and relaxation, while others find that the situations and problems portrayed in TV programmes reflect the facts in their real life. She further indicated that some audiences learn to solve problems through watching how other people on TV solve their difficulties.

People's uses of traditional media such as radio, television, and print publications can be grouped into five categories on the basis of previous research (Livingstone 1998,

McQuail, Blumler, and Brown 1972, Palmgreen, Wenner, and Rosengren 1985, Rubin 1985, 2002):

1. Surveillance: seeking information / education that facilitates the understanding of the world
2. Personal identity: using the media as reference for identifying and reinforcing values
3. Personal relationships (social utility): using the media for companionship or to enhance social interaction
4. Diversion: escaping from personal problems and the stresses of daily life as an emotional release
5. Entertainment: using the media to obtain enjoyment, for fun and/or relaxation

These early studies using the U&G approach have revealed some common major gratifications that audiences obtain from using media. However, the *uses and gratifications* theory has come under criticisms from a number of scholars. Swanson (1979) indicated that U&G is too general to be viewed as a framework of theories, which may lead to conceptual ambiguities and inconsistences. Moreover, it raises questions in terms of reliability and validity as most *uses and gratifications* research relies on self-reports based on respondents' memory (Infante et al. 1997). Similarly, Becker (1979) also pointed out the difficulty in measuring 'gratification' because each individual may interpret the media in their own terms. It also has inadequacies in that it fails to provide much successful prediction or causal explanation of media choice and use (McQuail 1983) or overstates the real autonomy of the audience (Elliott 1974).

Admittedly, its individualistic nature prevents the approach from exploring a more critical discourse of audiences' perception. Despite these limitations, however, this approach is useful for comparison and description, and is widely and increasingly applied (McQuail 2005). Moreover, looking at communication apprehension with the U&G perspective and focusing attention on individual audiences is useful in understanding why people may watch a particular type of programme among hundreds of choices. Bearing its strengths and limitations in mind, the present author adopts the approach as a data-collecting and analysis strategy (cf. Severin and Tankard 1997, McQuail 1994), and

the above findings of audiences in Western democracies can be used as a benchmark to explore the audience's uses and gratifications of television in China.

## 3.5 Studies on Mediation Shows

In recent years, the popularity of mediation shows on regional channels has attracted interest from Chinese scholars, though the literature is still limited and lacks empirical research on these shows' audiences, and their uses of and gratifications from the programmes. Hawes and Kong (2013) have carried out a discourse analysis of mediation shows in China and indicated that while such shows help to solve people's family disputes, the effect is too limited to really address social issues in Chinese society. Legal scholar Li (2012b, 2009) considers mediation on TV as the 'fourth mediation paradigm' in addition to judicial, administrative, and People's mediation. He contends that while the pattern of mediation is influential in terms of promoting social ethics and psychologically pacifying disputing parties' pressure, its intrinsic legal procedure and legitimacy are problematic. A legitimate alternative dispute resolution (ADR), the author advocates, should be established on the basis of rules and principles. Other scholars seem to be concerned more about the privacy issue of mediation shows. For instance, Liu and Yan (2012) state that programme makers should protect the disputing parties' privacy in order to prevent negative social influence and trouble for these people. Similarly, Wu (2013) indicates that mediation television shows play a role of 'magnifier', amplifying social problems as well as social identity, and he is concerned that such shows solve personal disputes at the cost of individuals' privacy. Zheng (2012) points out several limitations of TV mediation: the types of disputes in this genre are constrained to a narrow range, mediation on TV places too much emphasis on moral persuasion, and it lacks a proper promotion of legal knowledge. She also argued that there is a contradiction between the entertaining nature of television and the dispute resolving purpose of mediation. Yin (2012) studied mediation shows in terms of their public and private discourse, and concluded that a reasonable, appropriate, and effective communication pattern sets the necessary premise of the healthy development of mediation shows. These studies done so far have mainly been conducted along legal and content lines. Studies on why people watch and what they get out of mediation shows are still absent.

## 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed three bodies of literature. According to the normative framework established by scholars in the Western democracies, media in authoritarian societies should subordinate their freedom to the obligation of carrying out the goals of the party or the government. Media marketisation brings about competitions in the marketplace that give rise to two different views: some authors believe that profit-orientation surpasses other responsibilities, bringing about commercialisation and excessive entertainment. They are concerned that the convergence of entertainment and politics on TV would generate political apathy among citizens and jeopardise democracy. Other scholars have carried out empirical studies to test this media malaise concern, contending that TV entertainment programming or popular culture in general plays a role to encourage rather than suppress citizen engagement. Unlike the findings in liberal democracies, where discussions on entertainment and politics often focus on soft news, empirical studies on Chinese media reveal a somewhat different outcome. On one hand, entertainment television such as reality shows manages to provide audiences a 'democratic' feeling by engaging them in the production process. On the other hand, these authors argue that the 'democracy' on the surface does not actually promote democracy nor does it challenge the authorities; on the contrary, it helps to enhance the existing power structure. Similar findings are also observed in newspapers in China (see, for example, Stockmann 2013). In the Chinese context, the studies on media entertainment and politics might lead to a different discussion from the Western context. By and large, entertainment on media seems to pursue profit by appealing to the audience and appeasing the authorities. A recent popular genre, mediation reality shows, seems to manifest such characteristics, as well.

Mediation reality shows have been proliferating on local and satellite channels in recent years. As a first show of this genre, *XLNJ* has been featured by its collaboration with the local justice bureau, which symbolises the endorsement from the local government. While claiming to promote a harmonious society, the show appears to contradict the 'saving-face' culture by publicly presenting domestic disputes. What attracts audiences to this show, and what do they get out of it? Do they watch it for education, information, or just for fun? Answers to these questions will enhance our understanding of Chinese audiences. In this light, the U&G approach appears to be useful in exploring

the audience's perception of such programmes in light of cultural, entertainment, and political contentions.

To the author's knowledge, studies on the relationship between Chinese media, politics, and audiences are still in their early stages. More attention is needed for entertainment reality shows and their audiences, and therefore I endeavour to add a missing link by pursuing a study of this particular programme. In addition to the U&G approach, I adopt a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the audience's *uses and gratifications* of mediation shows and relationships with television.

# Chapter Four

# METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 Introduction

Starting in the beginning of 2008, the mediation show *Xin Lao NiangJiu* (新老娘舅, *XLNJ*) has been widely popular not only among the audiences in Shanghai, but also in neighbouring cities and towns. Having labelled itself '*helping to establish harmonious society*', the show responded to the political ideology proposed by the government at that time under the Hu-Wen administration. Its innovative and bold demonstration of mediation of real family disputes steadily captured the attention of a curious audience. It is to some extent extraordinary that such a specific format continually ranks high in audience ratings and even leads to imitations[47]. *XLNJ* found its niche in a competitive television market, catering to the demands of both the audience and the authorities.

This study devotes attention to the phenomenon of mediation television shows, aiming to provide insights into why people watch the show, what they take out of it, how the production of the *XLNJ* show compounds civil mediation with cultural, political, as well as entertaining elements, and correspondingly how producers and the audience perceive and deal with the potential contradictions provoked by that combination. In order to address these questions, I adopted a multiple method design taking advantage of the strengths of different research methods. The research overall was divided into two phases, the first focusing on the programme production and the second looking into audience perception. Before the initiation of this research, I conducted a preliminary participant observation along with a documents analysis as part of the preparation for the later research design. The preliminary observation was used to make initial forays into the new phenomena of the mediation show, with the purpose as much to observe the

[47] Following *XLNJ*, similar programmes such as *Happiness Magic Cube (Xingfu Mofang)* from Dragon TV and *Disputing Parties (Jiafang Yifang)* from Channel Young emerged in 2010 and 2011, respectively.

production procedure as to obtain relevant documents and identify likely interviewees for qualitative in-depth interviews. At the time, I had close contact with the *XLNJ* production team and became acquainted with several programme makers. I followed the entire process of programme production, from receiving cases through the telephone hotline, case selection in the pre-production meetings, studio shooting, to the final post-production editing. The preliminary observation period proved considerably helpful for my later research. I also familiarised myself with the format and content of this particular show through studying broadcast videos. Meanwhile, I gained access to certain internal documents such as regulations and notifications from the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), from which I identified potential restraints facing the programme makers. This, in turn, facilitated my design and the subsequent conduct of in-depth interviews.

In the first phase, I carried out the analysis of visual and written materials and in-depth interviews with major players in the production process. The goal for the first phase was to untangle the social and political context of the mediation show as well as to explore aims of the show as perceived by the various production staff and mediators. I managed to cover a range of players involved in programme production: the programme producer, episode directors (editors)[48], hotline receptionists, presenters, mediators on television, and production crew members. For the purpose of understanding their interpretations of the aims and goals of this show, I also interviewed audience commentators who are not involved in the decision-making process of the programme production and non-TV mediators working in actual life. In addition, I also conducted a basic content analysis of episodes broadcast every other week in 2013 to identify the frequency of topics that appeared on the show and to explore the relationship between topics and audience ratings.

In the second phase, the audience perception part, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was adopted. I used an online survey to collect the

[48] Episode directors and editors are interchangeable in this thesis, because for studio-based TV programmes, episode directors are responsible not only for directing the studio filming but also for subsequent editing. It usually takes at least two hours to film one single case; episode directors will have to cut most and shorten the story to fit the assigned time slot. There are post-production technicians who apply special effects, captions, and voice-overs. Episode directors are the staff members who make the first decision about what can and what cannot be shown on TV.

audience's responses to a series of questions regarding their motivations to watch, their uses of and gratifications from mediation programmes, as well as their perceptions of the programme content in terms of its entertaining, social and political, and cultural aspects. Having conducted the online survey and the subsequent statistical analysis, I then proceeded to carry out focus group research. I utilised focus group analysis not only as a tool to investigate potential explanations for contradictions that the survey findings suggested, but also for the purpose of seeking substantive and insightful remarks to understand participants' perceptions of the show. Both the online survey and the focus group helped to produce knowledge about the way in which audiences make sense of and use the mediation show in their daily life.

In the sections that follow, I will present and exemplify the research design of the three methodological tools mentioned above: in-depth interviews, online survey, and focus group discussions. I will also discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the three approaches respectively.

## 4.2 Preliminary Fieldwork

As part of the preparation for my research, I conducted preliminary fieldwork in December 2010 that combined observation with preparatory document analysis as well as some informal interviews. The main purpose of this fieldwork was to gain an understanding of programme makers' activities and beliefs. The observation concentrated on the production of *XLNJ*, including its preparation and editorial phases. I followed the entire process of programme production, from receiving cases through the telephone hotline, case selecting in pre-production meetings, studio shooting, and post-production editing. The aim of this observation period was to clarify what factors played a part in the production procedure of the mediation show. The pre-production was in effect a decision-making phase, during which programme makers selected dispute issues and corresponded with the mediator. The production stage referred to the recording phase when disputes were disentangled by the mediator, presenter, and audience commentators in the studio. And in the post-production phase, directors performed editing of the programme, such as cutting off disputants' conversations that they considered irrelevant, adding captions, and creating trailers.

The early stages of observations were mostly non-participatory; I watched, listened to, and made notes of the production team's regular meetings from a bystander's

perspective without talking much with the production staff. At that time, I restrained myself from intervening in an attempt not to influence their daily work. It was not long before I established direct rapport with the production crew members, and after that, I began to engage in informal conversations with them. That is to say, the degree of my observation during the research shifted from 'non-participation' to 'passive participation' (Schwartz and Schwartz 1955). My role in the beginning was that of a 'complete observer', who watched from the sideline without becoming involved. During the later stage of the observation, I chose the role of 'observer-as-participant', in which I was able to 'observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership' (Schrøder et al. 2003, 380). Such a degree of participatory observation allowed me to observe more closely and make more detailed notes on what happened during the production course of the mediation.

I had prepared an observation checklist[49] listing questions worth attention to ensure proper and complete collection of necessary data. The checklist functioned as a memo, as well, so I was able to grasp a general idea of the production phase by ticking the items or taking down notes on it. Questions on the checklist mainly focused on: whether disputes on the show are real or being scripted, the source of dispute cases, decisions being made over the dispute content, what has been eliminated during post-production editing and on what ground, and whether there are any tensions during the production of the show.

I had the opportunity to access certain internal regulatory documents[50], including editorial instructions from the producer and documents by the SARFT (*guifanxing wenjian*) informing TV stations about decisions, orders, and directives. I downloaded all of the accessible documents at the time and reviewed them to learn the requirements and constraints on editing, with the purpose to identify potential problems and challenges facing the programme makers. I watched a large number of *XLNJ* shows (TV broadcast

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[49] See Appendix 2.

[50] The *XLNJ* production team staff used a shared mailbox, where they uploaded the paperwork for the programme such as transcripts and outlines. The producer also uploaded some instructive or regulatory documents from the higher TV station authorities or the SARFT. I was given permission by the producer to access this mailbox.

and online archives) to obtain a further understanding of the structure and format of the show in order to observe the presenters' and mediators' speeches and behaviours. During the later stage of the observation, I initiated casual conversations with several production staff member in an attempt to obtain more specific information. Gaining a thorough familiarity with the show was a crucial part of the preparation for the later research.

The onsite observation was helpful in identifying and guiding relationships with interviewees; helping to get a feel for how activities are organised and prioritised and how people interrelate; and providing me a source of questions to be addressed with participants (Dewalt, Dewalt, and Wayland 1998). But as with any research technique, participant observation has limitations. The researcher's appearance, age, gender, ethnicity, and class may affect the extent to which she is accepted in the group under study (Dewalt, Dewalt, and Wayland 1998, Spradley 1980). Moreover, the existing mores in the group, or the so-called structural characteristics (Dewalt, Dewalt, and Wayland 1998), may also inhibit researcher's acceptance. There are various reasons for researchers to be excluded: a lack of trust, the use of a language that is unfamiliar to the researcher, or their changing from one language to another that is not understood by the researcher (Schwartz and Schwartz 1955). I managed to minimise these influence and enhance my acceptance by taking advantage of dialect commonalities and by my familiarity with some of the production team. As a native speaker of Chinese born in Shanghai, I engaged in most conversations in Shanghainese in order to put the interviewees at ease. In this way, it is also helpful to establish rapport with production staff members.

## 4.3 Phase I: In-Depth Interviews

### *4.3.1 Aims & Limitations*

During the preliminary fieldwork, I had learned the production of a mediation show: criteria for case selection, meetings where dispute cases are discussed, the recording of the mediation in the studio, and the editing to make an episode ready for broadcast. In addition, I developed my understanding of the aim of the show through some casual and more structured talk with the production staff. Based on the data and my initial understanding, I held in-depth interviews to investigate further to acquire more detailed information. As Fraenkel and Wallen (2003, 440) noted, 'Interviewing is an important way

for a researcher to check the accuracy of—to verify or refute—the impressions he or she has gained from observation'.

The purpose of interviewing the production team members and the mediation committees was to determine what is on their minds—what they see as the aim of the mediation show and what they think about possible tensions in combining civil mediation with a television format in general and entertainment in particular. To address such questions, I interviewed those involved in the programme production with the purpose of exploring the decisive factors during the course of the production and obtaining an insight into the intended aims of the show as seen by various interviewees. As a qualitative research method, in-depth interviews are useful for researchers to elicit information in order to achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view or situation (Berry 1999). Indeed, through interviews, we could learn from people those aspects we cannot directly observe (Gobo 2008).

A critical problem in interview research is interviewer bias, which according to Selltiz and her colleagues 'can more correctly be described as interviewers differences, which are inherent in the fact that interviewers are human beings and not machines and they do not work identically' (Selltiz et al. 1965, 583). This means, for example, that two interviewers might come out with different results after they interviewed the same interviewee with the very same questions, because interviewers could emotionally engage to a different degree in conversations. Interviewer bias or interviewers' differences may give rise to the insufficiency of between-interview comparability, which would in turn affect the validity and reliability of the data. As I conducted all of the interviews myself, this was not a problem.

Admittedly, it is precarious to find a balance between 'prejudicing the answers to questions, establishing a relationship that would allow the interviews to be successful and holding a civilised conversation' (Corbin 1972, 305). In order to carry out productive interviews whilst minimising bias, I offered minimal guidance during interviews and tried to bring out 'the affective and value-laden implications of the subjects' response' (Merton and Kendall 1946). I carefully managed my relationships with the interviewees. Though in theory it would be possible to gain trust from the interviewees by showing interest, in practice, the degree of difficulty varies depending on an individual's character and experience. In the interviews for this study, I occasionally met with people who were suspicious of what I was doing. They gave 'an icy reception' when they felt that they were

the objects of a study. Such a situation usually happened with people who are unfamiliar with formal interviews. In that case, I spent more time on casual chatting to warm up the atmosphere. In those interviews, I was conscious of the importance and delicacy to establish a friendly yet detached relationship with interviewees.

### *4.3.2 Research Protocol*

The composition of the group of interviewees aimed at covering major players in the programme production, notably the producer, episode directors, presenters, and mediators. They formed the production team of the show. Most interviews were carried out with those intellectually involved in the production process and the decision-making of the content. In addition, I also conducted an interview with a technical crew member to gain technical insight. The production team was involved in regular pre-production meetings to discuss and deicide which cases would be selected for televised mediation, whereas the technical crew only participated in the shooting phase. Off-screen mediators refer to those who work in sub-district offices and town mediation committees (*jiedao banshichu*) or neighbourhood committees (*jumin weiyuanhui*). Onsite audience commentators were volunteers or interested viewers who sit on the sideline watching and are asked to give their opinions during the mediation.

Bearing in mind that the composition of interviewees consisted of people of different professional backgrounds, I decided to conduct relatively systematic, but partly different, semi-structured interviews in the interest of flexibility without sacrificing comparability. Interviews were carried out according to an interview guide that consisted of a series of questions designed to obtain interviewees' thoughts and opinions towards the mediation show. I prepared separate interview guides[51] for programme makers, on-screen mediators, ordinary mediators, and audience commentators respectively. These interview guides contained the same opinion questions for all, and were designed to gain information that can be compared and contrasted later, as well as different demographic and experience questions aimed at determining specific information that the respondents from different professional groups possess.

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[51] See Appendix 3.

The purpose of using in-depth interviews with programme makers and mediators on TV was to determine, first of all, what they see as the aim of the mediation show; secondly, why they have chosen the entertainment format and what they see as the pros and cons of this choice; thirdly, what they perceive as the impact on viewers and Chinese society in general of televised and entertained mediation; and finally, how they deal with the intersection where the personal and the private becomes political. Interviewees' answers to questions were then analysed to explore answers, latent discursive goals of the show, and potential tensions by identifying their opinions and reflections on these four aspects.

As for the ordinary mediators not involved in the TV programme, interviews were conducted with the purpose to obtain an idea of how those involved in TV differ from 'ordinary' mediators. Particular questions were asked to understand whether they perceive televised mediation as an interference in their roles; whether the show changed the format and the mediation process; and what differences there are between televised mediation and ordinary mediation.

Although they were not on the show before 2011[52], I decided to include the audience commentators in the interview process. These participants do play a part in the show although they are not involved in the pre-production phase. Most questions remained the same as for ordinary mediators, while a couple of questions were modified to learn their opinions from a television viewers' perspective.

### *4.3.3 Conducting In-Depth Interviews*

In the fall of 2011, I carried out interviews with a total of 20 interviewees, consisting of eight programme makers, seven mediators, and five audience commentators[53]. Thanks to the prior fieldwork, I had already become acquainted with most of the production staff, which allowed this stage to proceed smoothly. Most interviewees from the production team had been identified primarily through the fieldwork observation. Off-screen mediators were selected through snowball sampling methods, through a local interviewee already part of the network. I got to know Interviewee #9, a mediator working at a sub-district disputes mediation office, through my personal network, who later

[52] The show started to include audience comments on the site in May 2011.

[53] See Appendix 4.

introduced me to Interviewee #10 from a neighbourhood committee. Upon the conclusion of interviews with them, I asked whether they knew other mediators at sub-district offices or town mediation committees. Among the contacts they provided, I then identified the other two ordinary mediators[54] for interviews. The on-site audience participation was still on trial, so there was no regular audience commentator at the time. Therefore, these interviewees[55] were selected later, on the spot.

Sixteen interviews were conducted in Shanghainese, and four in Mandarin Chinese. The number of interviews does not include the casual conversations. Since I frequently visited the production site during the interview stage, some unplanned conversations with the producer and other production staff took place when I encountered them; I obtained helpful information from these unintended talks.

In accordance with the interview guide protocol, I began each interview by briefly introducing myself and my research topic[56]. For ethical considerations, I also informed the interviewees that their personal information would be kept confidential and they would remain anonymous in any research report. I asked for interviewees' permission to record the interview as well as their oral consent to proceed with the interview. I began the interview with some easy questions such as the interviewees' role in this show and their opinions on issues related to saving face. Usually, following the discussion on these cultural topics, some rapport could be achieved. Then I would move to questions regarding social and political aspects, such as the relation between the Shanghai Justice Bureau and the show and what sort of disputes are included and excluded. At this point, provided that the interviewees felt comfortable with the conversation, I would ask them (particularly the programme makers) if they had encountered any difficulties or pressure from the authorities.

The majority of interviews were conducted on the spot, in meeting rooms inside the Shanghai Television and the mediation committee office. A few were conducted in some relatively public places—mostly in cafes—chosen by the interviewee.

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[54] Interviewees #11 and #12

[55] Audience commentators onsite: #13, 14, 16, 17, and 20

[56] Considering that politics is a relatively sensitive topic in China, I placed less emphasis on my political science background but more on media studies when I explained my research topic to participants, so as to encourage them to talk rather than being cautious.

At the analysis stage, I transcribed all of the interviews and categorised transcripts into three groups: programme makers (mediators on TV were included in this group), audience commentators, and ordinary mediators. I studied and compared their answers to the same questions, looking for similarities as well as differences. I also looked into implications of conversations, especially when politics-related questions were asked. Whilst some interviewees had no problem with these topics, others became cautious in choosing the right words to answer. For example, Interviewee #3 gave an indirect answer to the questions by using a metaphor about the realness of the show, which suggested that it was somewhat staged in the very beginning since some disputants refused to go on TV, but he then emphasised that the stories on the show 'have always been genuine'.

## 4.4 Phase I: An Analysis of Disputes Topics

### *4.4.1 Aims & Limitations*

During the interviews with programme makers, I had an impression that they tend to avoid disputes related to the distribution of properties because the audiences are believed to be fed up with this kind of argument[57]. According to the producer and directors, house-related disputes appeared on the show quite frequently during the early days. They worried that this recurring topic would influence the audience's interests in watching, and therefore claimed to emphasise emotional cases so as to promote moral standards in society. To the programme makers, episodes involving house-related issues are likely to earn lower audience ratings than other cases. If programme makers place less emphasis on programmes addressing housing issues, what topics are frequently covered in the show? I therefore decided to conduct an initial content analysis of broadcasts in 2013 to explore what topics are covered in the show and to determine whether, in reality, the programme makers managed to reduce the emphasis on house-related issues. Although the programme makers argued that the public is not interested in housing issues any more, this may well reflect their anxiety about the regime's attitude because, as we will see in Chapter Five, this turned out to be the main topic.

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[57] Interviewees #1, 3, and 4

A simple or basic media content analysis classifies what is included in categories that can be statistically analysed. The advantage of basic media content analysis is that it provides an overview of dispute topics throughout a year, and thus provides valuable insights over time through analysis of media content. The purpose of using content analysis was to identify issues involved in various cases and explore the relation between dispute topics and audience ratings.

### *4.4.2 Protocol & Realisation*

Before I conducted the coding and simple analysis of broadcast cases, I had obtained a detailed list of broadcast episodes from the producer. In the document, it recorded broadcast date, presenter, mediator, episode title, and audience rating for each episode aired from 2008 to the present. Based on this list, I choose dispute cases broadcast in 2013 for the simple content analysis. This choice was made for two reasons: firstly, all episodes for this year were available online, while broadcasts in earlier years were difficult to access[58]. Secondly, I conducted my interviews with the programme makers in 2011; if they did indeed cut down the number of house-related issues, the broadcasts two years later would manifest this change.

Considering that content analysis would be very time-consuming, I decided to carry out analysis of broadcasts every other week instead of over the whole year. I selected episodes broadcast every other week in 2013, starting from January 1 (for a full list, see Appendix 5). In total, 183 episodes were selected, covering 140 dispute cases[59]. Special programmes were usually interviews with mediators or presenters about their experience in helping people to solve their issues. Therefore, special programmes were not selected for coding. Regarding cases that were broadcast in two episodes, I only coded the second episode to avoid bias caused by repeated coding.

Since mediation on the show generally focused on family disputes, I therefore created four categories to describe the relationship between disputants: (married or unmarried) couples, siblings, parents and children, and/or in-laws. I also established in

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[58] Broadcast from June 2012 to the date are available on the Internet: http://www.iqiyi.com/a_19rrgua2ip.html#vfrm=2-3-0-1 [accessed on 7 May 2015]

[59] Among the 183 episodes, there were 5 special programmes produced for holidays such as New Year's Day, Spring Festival, and May Day. There were 38 cases that were divided into two episodes.

total eight categories of frequent conflict sources that included (real estate and movable) property disputes (such as disagreement on the distribution of heritage or family income, or the ownership of a house), disloyalty (extramarital affairs or being unfaithful to one's boy/girlfriend), supporting the elderly (usually disputes between siblings regarding who should take care of their old parent(s)), child rearing (such as arguments on the proper educational method for the child in question; they usually happen between couples, old parents and adult children, or in-laws), domestic violence, gambling, opinion difference (disputes triggered by disputants' different opinions or attitudes towards a topic), and other (disputes involving causes other than the mentioned seven types above). The first five types were created based on interviews with programme makers, and the last three were identified during the coding stage. Furthermore, I also created five dummy variables to code the mediator: Wei Lan, Pei Zhen, Huang Feijue, Wan Feng, and Bai Wanqing. When coding the selected episodes, I first watched the first three minutes, where the presenter would usually provide a brief introduction of the disputants and their appeals. This helped me to learn the relationship between disputants and obtain a general idea about the dispute between them. Then I skipped to around 17-20 minutes into the show, when the mediator steps in and provides suggestions to the disputants (see Chapter Five for the structure of the show). Solutions provided by the mediator gave clear clues of the disputants' requests and revealed the main causes of the dispute. Some cases happened between more than two disputants, involving more than one type of relationship, such as disputes between young couples that can also involve parents (in laws). Most cases involved more than one cause and thus were categorised into at least one or more of the eight categories.

After coding, I analysed the occurrence of each disputed topic by calculating the frequency. I conducted T-test and R-test analysis to explore the correlation between audience rating and dispute topics. I also carried out regression analysis in studying the relationship between audience rating and independent variables such as mediators, disputants' relationship, and dispute topics.

## 4.5 Phase II: a. Online Survey

Having learned the production course and explored the intended aims of the mediation show during the first research phase, I started the second phase of research by looking into why people watch, the audience's perception of the show, as well as their *uses and*

*gratifications*. From the interviews, I found that the programme makers credited the show for its helpfulness in various aspects. Therefore, one purpose of the survey was to explore whether the television viewers perceive the show in the same way as those insiders. Particularly, I was interested to explore the demographic characteristics of the audience: their uses of and gratifications from the show and possible contradictions contained in the show as perceived by the audience in terms of entertainment, social and political, and cultural aspects.

The online survey served two important functions for this research. Firstly, it operated as investigatory exercise that allowed me to examine the relationship between the audience's sociodemographic characteristics, habitual behaviours, and their perception of the mediation show. Second, findings generated from the survey served as a base from which I was able to formulate a better set of questions and a more efficient protocol to be used in the focus group.

### *4.5.1 Aims & Limitations*

To conduct my survey, I used web-based rather than paper-based questionnaires. First of all, web-based surveys save time. With quality websites, one can download accumulated responses in various formats quickly, such as an Excel file or an SPSS dataset. Paper-based surveys may take several weeks or several months to distribute, collect, and input to computerised form for analysis. Secondly, the web-based surveys allowed me to potentially reach a large population, considering the fact of the increasing size of Chinese web users: the number of China's Internet users had reached 513 million by the end of 2011 (CNNIC 2012).

Yet, any research method has its bias, and the very nature of the web-based survey means that response bias is inevitable. First, there is the bias of self-selection. Although I have made efforts to circulate the survey link as widely as possible, some people would still be left out. Second, a limitation of web-based surveys is that they require respondents to be literate, have basic computer skills, and have access to the Internet. Admittedly, the online survey cannot reach those who have no access to the internet. Taking the limitation of the non-random selection into account, the survey findings were not generalised to the whole audience of the mediation show. Rather, the survey served as an exploration into the audience and provided a general view of the online mediation show audience.

### 4.5.2 *Protocol & Realisation of Survey*

The construction and wording of the questionnaire went through a careful and deliberate preparation period. After designing the web-based survey instrument, I pretested it with four acquaintances of different ages, educational levels, and professions; this pilot group consisted of one full-time housewife in her thirties, one retired accountant, one university student, and one bank clerk in his late twenties. The purpose was to get as much feedback as possible from different people. I sent them the link of the pre-test survey and asked them to record the time it took to complete the survey and to note down any questions they had when filling in the questionnaire. This helped me to identify confusions or inappropriate questions in the survey. Through the pre-test, I could ensure that I asked questions in an efficient way and used appropriate language that would not cause interviewees to grow concerned (for example, about political sensitivity), which might prevent them from completing the survey (Hildebrandt 2013). I established my online survey on Qualtrics.com whose servers are hosted in the U.S.; as a result, the pre-test process also allowed me to ensure that the web link was accessible to users in mainland China.

At the beginning of the survey, a statement of confidentiality was provided including information that the survey was only for academic research purposes and demographic data that linked to the individuals would not be disclosed. To increase participation, the participants were told that anyone who completed the survey would be eligible to enter a free prize drawing. Interested participants could fill in their email address towards the end of the survey, and 20 prize-winners would be randomly chosen out of the total participants. This incentive proved to be effective for participants to complete the survey.

The self-administered survey consisted of a total of 26 questions, including three questions to distinguish non-viewers from regular viewers[60]: 'Have you heard of the *XLNJ* mediation show?'; 'Have you ever watched *XLNJ* before?'; and 'In the past week, how many times have you watched *XLNJ*?'. Those who had not heard of the show or not watched it before were not included in the final analysis. Survey questions covered five main aspects: demographic background; the viewers' uses of and gratifications from the

[60] See Appendix 6.

show, i.e. to what extent they watch the show so as to have fun, socially interact, pass time, seek information, or improve familiarity with dialect; and perceptions in terms of entertainment, cultural, and political aspects. Furthermore, there were other questions measuring independent variables such as watching habits, political culture, political efficacy, experience of mediation, satisfaction with society, interested sorts of dispute, and political interest. Towards the end of questionnaire, two vignettes were provided to explore participants' choice of dispute solution and the underlying reasons. Questions on some topics were asked in several different ways in order to increase internal reliability.

Almost all questions were closed, with only a couple being open-ended. By virtue of the online survey technique, respondents were forced to answer all of the closed-ended questions on one page as to proceed to the next; however, open-ended questions were optional for them to complete. As I had estimated, the majority of respondents completed all of the closed-ended questions and skipped the open-ended ones. However, the number of those who filled in the open-ended questions were more than I had expected.

The survey link was distributed via social media, because according to a 2012 McKinsey survey report, China's users of social media services are among the most active in the world. '91 percent of respondents [said] they visited a social-media site in the previous six months...' and on average, Chinese internet users 'spend 46 minutes a day visiting social-media sites' (Chiu, Lin, and Silverman 2012, 1-3). These facts provided a solid ground for the online survey with the possibilities to draw samples from a large and active population. The target population for this study was television viewers who had watched or at least heard about the mediation show *XLNJ*. In order to reach my target population, I particularly distributed the survey link on several networking service (SNS) sites and bulletin boards (BBS) where these people are likely to gather[61]. I also asked the mediation show *XLNJ* to tweet the survey link to its followers through its official account on the Sina Weibo platform[62], and they agreed to do so. In addition, with an attempt to create a snowball effect to increase the number of responses, I also asked friends to send the link to others they knew. Links posted through SNS sites, BBS, Sina

[61] These sites are kaixin001.com, renren.com, tianya.cn, and douban.com

[62] Sina Weibo is a micro-blogging service provider, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter.

Weibo, or email circulation were given a numerical suffix respectively so that I could track the source of respondents. The results turned out that most respondents came from Sina Weibo, and from other sources I did not receive a great deal of response.

The online survey received 201 responses in total. Among the total responses, 92 percent (185) of respondents had heard of the show and watched it at least once in the past week. This is a fairly small N for generalisable conclusions, but sufficient for carrying out an analysis and interpretations. I utilised the ANOVA test to analyse the respondents' demographics and logit regression analysis in studying the relationship between independent variables and audiences' perceptions of the show in terms of the abovementioned three aspects.

## 4.6 Phase II: b. Focus Group

### *4.6.1 Aims & Limitations*

Online survey analysis based on quantitative results provided us with an initial understanding of the viewers' *uses and gratifications* as well as their perception of the show in terms of entertainment, social and political, and cultural aspects. It was, however, insufficient to give an insightful and substantive understanding of reasons and motivations embedded in participants' perception.

As a complement to the online survey as well as to further interpret the audience's points of view, I adopted a focus group approach to make up for the inherent flaws of the survey format that reduce reality to numbers (Morgan, Krueger, and King 1998). Focus groups became prevalent in the 1980s. In academic research, Merton and Kendall (1946), who are regarded the earliest researchers who used focus groups, see this approach as an addendum to the survey, a convenient aggregate of individual opinions. As for the composition of groups, Merton and Kendall initially used relative strangers of diverse social demographic backgrounds, a common practice in the 1990s that continues today (Javidi and Javidi 1991). Merton and Kendall's (1946) method of conducting focus groups was regarded as establishing a standard approach. They recruited relative strangers of diverse sociodemographic backgrounds and used one-shot design rather than meeting the same group repeatedly. At the same time, however, some innovations in focus group design have also taken place, using a different approach from the survey sampling method to recruit 'naturally occurring' groups (Liebes and Katz 1992). Lunt and Livingstone

(1996) believe that focus groups can be used to overcome the disadvantages of ethnography and participant observation. They consider conversation, public discussion, and gossip as important processes in the production and reproduction of meanings in life. Focus groups provided another face of reality, since open-ended questions encourage interaction among the participants and allow them to respond in their own way. Focus groups were therefore conducted in an attempt to provide explanations to the survey findings as well as the audience's interpretation of the show. The discussions correspond to the way in which attitudes, opinions, and practices of human beings are produced, expressed, and exchanged in everyday life, whereas opinions presented in surveys are detached from such a communicative and interactive reality (Flick 2006).

Admittedly, there are limitations to focus groups. Firstly, small convenience samples limit the generalisability of the findings. The participants are not representative of the entire population. To minimise this bias, I increase the number of entry points, that is, asking as many people as I know to recommend potential participants. Secondly, a limitation of the focus group methodology (Kitzinger 1995) is that I cannot determine if differences identified in analysis resulted from in-group dynamics or environments, or whether they reflect true differences in attitudes (Basch 1987, Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook 2006). For this particular study, possible recall bias is another concern. Participants were asked to recall dispute cases up to 6 months before the focus group was conducted. As the cases they brought up were mostly recent broadcasts, they might not sufficiently represent a general coverage of cases.

### *4.6.2 Research Protocol*

My focus groups consisted of two sorts of participants, namely frequent and non-frequent viewers of the mediation show. By 'frequent' I mean people who watch the show on average twice or more a week, i.e. more than one-third of weekly broadcasts, given that the show is aired 6 days a week. Similarly, 'non-frequent' refers to those who watch *XLNJ* on average less frequently than twice a week. I excluded people who had never watched the show before, because they would not be able to contribute to discussion in the focus group. This categorisation was intended to discover how these two sorts of viewers perceived the aim of the show compared with that of the programme makers, and how they like or dislike the show in terms of its entertaining, social and political, and cultural aspects.

Questions asked in the focus groups aimed at disclosing viewers' attitudes, perceptions, and opinions towards the mediation show in terms of its content, mediating approach, and legal status, with the purpose of facilitating the researcher to understand whether and how the televised (entertainised) mediation contributes to maintaining social harmony. The question guide was thus designed to cover the perceived goals of the three mentioned aspects[63]. Particularly, these questions aimed to investigate why they were or were not interested in the *XLNJ* as well as to develop explanations of the contradictions found in the survey analysis. I intended to find answers to the above questions through the focus group discussion. The focus group was conducted to explore what the respondents considered as tensions and contradictions between the entertainment, the political, and the cultural aspects, and how they deal with these tensions and contradictions.

Focus group discussion was carried out with four groups in total, two consisting of frequent viewers and two consisting of non-frequent viewers. Because researchers generally agree that six to ten participants in a focus group work best (Lunt and Livingstone 1996), I recruited six participants for each group. Moreover, participants were divided into four groups in terms of their education level, frequency of watching the show, and age. This extra element in the categorisation was used for four reasons: firstly, to get an idea about whether saving face might be a generational issue; secondly, to determine whether audiences' perceptions and uses of the show as suggested by survey findings were somehow related to their education background; thirdly, to consider that people of lower educational level might become less encouraged to talk when in a group with those of higher educational level; and fourthly, mixed-gender groups aimed to balance the composition of the focus group. This leads to the following four groups:

***1st: frequent viewers, higher education group:*** frequent viewers of the *XLNJ*, educational attainment is college or higher, three women and three men.

***2nd: frequent viewers, lower education group:*** frequent viewers of the *XLNJ*, educational attainment is high school education or lower, three women and three men.

***3rd: non-frequent viewers, higher education group:*** less-frequent viewers, educational attainment is college or higher, three women and three men.

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[63] See Appendix 7.

***4rd: non-frequent viewers, lower education group:*** less-frequent viewers, educational attainment is high school education or lower, three women and three men.

Another criterion for selection was that participants should have lived in Shanghai for at least five years. In this way, group discussions could be held in the local dialect and participants should be able to understand each other better. Also, the five-year residency requirement was specified because the *XLNJ* show has been broadcast since 2008, which was approximately five years prior to when the focus groups were conducted.

Participants were recruited mainly through the internet and snow-balling. As mentioned before, the online survey offered a prize draw that respondents could enter by filling in their email address or mobile phone number at the end of questionnaire. Among the total 201 responses received, 109 provided their contact information. Considering that those who had responded more actively to open-ended questions might be more interested in participating in group discussion, I therefore selected 30 active respondents, including the 20 prize-winners, to increase the possibility of participation. I contacted them via email or phone, and asked them to participate in a group discussion on the topic of the show. I also told them that a reward would be offered, but not the specific amount. In addition, I also posted recruitment advertisements through Sina Weibo, since this platform had proved relatively effective in the survey research. I tweeted the ad post via my Weibo account and asked my friends to forward it to their networks. In addition, I also asked the *XLNJ* official account to repost and forward the ad to its followers. I received 11 positive responses from the former survey respondents and 26 responses from the Weibo post, including both frequent and non-frequent viewers. The final 12 frequent-viewer participants consisted of seven former survey respondents and five Weibo users.

I categorised the selected participants into four groups according to their viewing habits and educational level. According to the survey, the average educational level was between college and bachelor's degree. Therefore, college/university education was made the dividing point between the higher and lower education groups, i.e. the higher education groups included university students and participants who had obtained a college/bachelor or higher degree, while the lower education group included those with high school education or lower.

Focus groups were carried out on a weekend; each group discussion lasted on average for one hour. Before starting the discussion, I welcomed and thanked the

participants for coming and informed them that the discussion was for a research study on television and its audience. I was careful not to mention terms relating to political studies so as not make them sensitive and become cautious in the discussion. According to research ethics, I told them that the discussion would be recorded but the data would only be used for academic purposes. I then asked for their consent before proceeding.

Before starting the focus groups, it is important to make the participants feel at ease with each other and the situation so that they will speak out freely from the discursive resources available to them in the area of study (Dewalt, Dewalt, and Wayland 1998). I started the discussion with easy questions, such as: Did you watch television yesterday, and what did you watch? In the first group, I asked participants to introduce themselves to others, but I noticed that they did not seem to be very comfortable to do such self-introduction. As such slight discomfort might affect participants' enthusiasm to talk, I skipped this introduction in the subsequent discussion groups.

The number of four focus groups makes it feasible to analyse discussions in an old-school yet thorough way rather than a more time-consuming way using computer-based tools that are often adopted in quantitative content analysis. This analysis approach allowed me to ponder participants' words thoroughly so as to identify not only common themes but also unique minor opinions before categorising and presenting comprehensive interpretations of group discussions.

Transcribing is one of the most time-consuming parts of the analysis because of the free flow of conversation, interruptions from time to time, and varying volumes of voices. Particularly in this case, some dialect jargons have been transcribed into Mandarin with the best effort to maintain its original meaning and suggestive tone.

I read the transcripts several times and then separated transcripts of frequent viewers and non-frequent viewers respectively, so that I had two master transcripts at hand. I then reorganised these discussions by putting discussions along questions asked on a topic and contentious themes[64]. I subsequently went through the two master transcripts to mark out similar and different opinions and to highlight typical quotes.

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[64] See Appendix 7, where specific questions asked to participants about their opinions on three aspects are listed.

After this, I went through the marked discussions again to categorise them into different themes in terms of how they related to entertaining, cultural, social, and political aspects.

## 4.7 Conclusion

The entire research effort adopted a multiple-method design, including both qualitative and quantitative methods. By combining in-depth interviews, online survey, and focus group in one study, I attempted to minimise bias and in turn make use of the inherent features of each method to provide substantial and concrete results for my study.

# Chapter Five

# PRODUCTION OF *XLNJ*

## 5.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter Two, media commercialisation in China urged the media outlets to produce more market-oriented programmes to attract the audience and generate profit. In the television sector, there was a tendency to exploit private and sensational stories to satisfy the audience's voyeuristic fascination, or at least a fascination with the emotional side of life. During the early 2000s, confessional (emotional) talk shows (*qingganlei jiemu*) and psychological advice shows (*xinli zixunlei jiemu*) were prevalent across the TV channels in the nation. These shows featured ordinary people revealing conflicts and emotional confusions in personal and emotional life. Shows like *Renjian*[65] focused on various issues people encountered in their lives, such as in-law disputes, faithless relationships, and extramarital affairs.

Initially, these seemingly 'close to life' shows were very popular among viewers, and also strategically answered to a 2003 CCP doctrine requiring that television programmes shall be 'close to reality, close to livelihood, and close to people'. (Hu Jingtao speech; see Miao 2011, 113). In the pursuit of higher profit, these shows frequently picked up sensational topics to attract viewers. Issues often seen on TV were mostly family disputes and relationship turmoil including conflicts between in-laws, disloyalty in relationships or marriages, disagreements on child rearing, and disputes between siblings over property distribution and caring for elderly parents (Miao 2011). As it turns out, these so-called reality shows have been mostly staged and exaggerated to satisfy audiences' curiosity about others' lives, which was seen as a voyeuristic need by the State Administration of

[65] *Renjian* (literally: Man's World) was a well-known talk show focusing on human feelings, broadcast on Jiangsu Satellite TV.

Radio, Film and Television (SARFT)[66]. The SARFT criticised these shows for exploiting vulgar and sensational affairs or even fabricating exaggerated stories to attract eyeballs or to satisfy people's voyeuristic needs[67], which results in a negative influence on society and opposes 'socialist morality' (Zhang 2008). This organisation required that TV shows on human emotions should deal with personal feelings and family relationships with a more positive attitude (Liu 2009). In 2011, the SARFT (2011c) issued another directive, 'Opinions on further regulating television programs on general-interest satellite channels', limiting the number of entertainment programmes especially on the satellite television channels in China and requiring that each channel should have at least one 'ethics building' programme to promote 'traditional virtues and socialist core values' (SARFT 2011c). The 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) laid emphasis on moral construction of social morals, and the SARFT respondingly translated this broad concern into concrete policies.

It proved to be just the right time for *Xin Lao NiangJiu* (新老娘舅, *XLNJ*) to broadcast on the Shanghai Entertainment Channel in early 2008, responding to the call for harmony from the government (which I will discuss in the next section). Learning from the lesson of confessional talk shoes, *XLNJ* carefully advertised itself as 'real people, real stories'[68]. It developed a unique type of television programme that incorporated elements from confessional talk shows, psychological advice shows, and reality shows. This hybrid character made it difficult to be clearly categorised. At the time, some Chinese scholars categorised it using general labels such as talk or reality show (Cao 2009, He 2009), whereas others classified it in terms of the content or meaning conveyed by the show, such as 'programmes with the purpose to help' (*bangmanglei jiemu*) (Zhao 2011), 'programmes focusing on human feelings' (*qingganlei jiemu*) (Chen 2009b, Li 2010a, Wu 2011), or 'programmes caring about people's livelihood' (*minshenglei jiemu*) (Fang 2013, Yang 2012). Until recently, in the wake of the proliferation of mediation shows, scholars and researchers in China seem to have reached consensus to give such kind of

[66] In a press release in October 2011, the spokesperson of SARFT, Wu Baoan, indicated that some programmes tend to satisfy people's voyeuristic pleasure by showing others' issues but fail to provide helpful solutions or establish positive life attitudes. See SARFT Q&A on further regulating television programmes (SARFT 2011b).

[67] For example, the programmes *Super Emotion (Chaoji Qinggan Duiduipeng)* from Shenzhen Satellite TV, *Mind Garden (Xinling Huayuan)* from Shanghai Television, etc. were named and shamed.

[68] This slogan is shown on the upper right-hand corner of the screen during the show.

programmes a synthesised label: Emotional Mediation Talk Show (Ding and Xu 2014, Lu 2013, Wang 2012, Xiao and Yu 2013a, Xiao and Yu 2013b, Xiao 2014). But this label misses an important element that programme makers have laid emphasis on, that is, realness[69]. So, I would follow some other scholars (Jiang 2012, Tao and Cheng 2012, Wu 2011, Yang 2010) and call them Mediation Reality Shows. In this study, for the sake of similarity and clarity, the term 'mediation reality show' and 'mediation show' are used interchangeably. Despite these different names and labels, the show has not experienced difficulty in attracting an audience.

One specific feature of *XLNJ* was the collaboration with the Shanghai Justice Bureau (SJB) as a source for cases and mediators. People's Mediators were widely distributed in every community and district, and they had extensive experience with disputes coming from ordinary people. The SJB was also happy about the cooperation, as in this way more people could get accustomed to civil mediation as a possible option for them. The other source for *XLNJ*'s cases was the programme hotline. The audience was welcomed to call the programme production team with their own problems. Programme directors would select from call-ins and invite the audience to participate in the studio filming. However, most people called only to inquire and were not willing to show their face on television[70]. Therefore, the resources for cases were limited, and the programme did not have many alternatives when selecting cases to be televised[71].

Although mediation on TV was new, it received an immediate reputation. What made it so popular among the audience and, as a first programme collaborating with the SJB, what does the show aim to achieve? Bearing such questions in mind, I have conducted my Phase I research looking at the production of the mediation show. In this chapter, I will firstly discuss the production context, notably the aims of the programme, revealing the dynamics behind this emergent programme. Then I will examine the production process of the show that includes three phases: collecting issues (pre-production), making the show (production), and the final editing (post-production). The three phases involve different groups of television workers. While the core

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[69] Interviewees #1, 2, 3, 4, and 5

[70] From the interview with programme makers, interviewees #1, 3, and 4.

[71] Interviewees #1, 3, 4.

production team[72] plays their role throughout all three phases, two other groups – the hotline reception team and the studio crew – are only involved at the pre-production and production phases, respectively. Finally, I will discuss the contentions that arose during the three production phases and explore whether interviewees see contradictions within the stated aims.

## 5.2 Origin and Aims of the Programme

By the end of October 2008, *XLNJ* had become the most watched programme among variety shows broadcast in Shanghai at the time. What made this programme so popular? When asked, the producer Yin Qingyi[73] said that the show was blessed with '*tianshi, dili, renhe*'[74] – being in the right place, at the right time, and in harmony with the people. In other words, the success of the programme was attributed to opportunities of the right political economic climate, support from the television station, a cooperative production crew, and a responsive mediator. These circumstances contributed to the creation of the *XLNJ*.

Additionally, the television climate was helpful. The show obtained its name *Xin Lao Niangjiu* from a popular situation comedy *Lao Niangjiu* (literally *Elder Uncle*) that the same channel used to broadcast. The latter used to be a very popular entertainment programme broadcasted by the Shanghai Oriental TV station (OTV) from the late 1990s until mid-2000. As part of a media conglomeration (see Chapter Two), OTV had merged with Shanghai Television, Shanghai People's Radio, and other media outlets to form the Shanghai Media Group (SMG) at the end of 2001. Media conglomeration proved to be effective in ensuring the central control of media resources (Yu 2009), and has generated opportunities for diverse programming and maximising profits (Lee 2003, Zhao 2000). As a consequence of conglomeration, the integration and the sharing of resources gave rise to a number of entertainment programmes in various formats, providing the audience

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[72] The core production team is generally made up hierarchically of a producer, an editor-in-chief (*zong bianshen*), and five directors.

[73] Interview #1 with Yin during a field observation in December 2010.

[74].'*tianshi, dili, renhe*' is an old Chinese saying from the works of Mencius. Mencius said, 'Opportunities of time vouchsafed by Heaven are not equal to advantages of situation afforded by the Earth, and advantages of situation afforded by the Earth are not equal to the union arising from the accord of Men.'

with the feeling of freshness and creativeness. Viewers of predictable sitcoms like *Loa Niangjiu* had been seemingly tired of its clichéd plots. After broadcasting twice a week, *Lao Niangjiu* started on a daily basis in late 2005. Under pressure of production load, the quality of the comedy declined; it had been criticised for poor production and unrealistic plots. Eventually, after 12 years, the programme ended its run in December 2007.

Meanwhile, due to the structural reform and convergence of resources of SMG, the former 'News & Entertainment Channel' *(Xinwen Yule Pingdao)* has been reorganised and renamed as the 'New Entertainment Channel' *(Xin Yule,* literally meaning 'new entertainment') in the beginning of 2008. Since the news component has been split off and merged with the Comprehensive News Channel, there appeared empty time slots that needed to be filled in. The leadership of the New Entertainment Channel began to conceive of a programme to replace *OTV News (Dongshi Xinwen)*. The channel manager intended to keep the programme title *Loa Niangjiu*, because it was already widely known. At that time, based on his past experience in making television talk shows, Yin proposed an idea of a mediation show in Shanghainese that would not only fit the name but also have the intention to cater to the political goal advocated by the central government, i.e. building and maintaining a harmonious society. The proposal was approved by the vice president of the SMG, who came up with the name of the programme: *Xin Lao Niangjiu* (literally meaning New Elder Uncle). In Chinese, the term *Lao Niangjiu* traditionally refers to maternal uncles who usually act as mediators in conflicts in the family (Cohen 1966, Goody 1990), and it is also used generally to refer to those helping neighbours to solve their disputes in a neighbourhood community (Lin 2013). Utilising the meaning contained in the title, the show invited experienced professionals to play the role of *Lao Niangjiu*, namely the mediator who helps to resolve people's family disputes. Mediators on the show adopted a combination of relevant regulations and policies to make disputants understand which are applicable to their situation; they also employ moral persuasions to calm the participants down and make them understand each other's difficulties.

The Department of Variety Arts (*Zongyi Bu*)[75] as well as the SJB also provided a favourable ground for the show. Yin regarded the show as the result of the department's

[75] *Zongyi Bu* (the Department of Variety Arts) was a functional department under the SMG, established in November 2005. It was in charge of two broadcasting channels, the *Yule Channel* (Entertainment) and the *Qicai*

continuous encouragements of creativity. *XLNJ* started its co-operation with SJB in 2008. The latter mobilised its affiliated district and sub-district (*jiedao*) judicial administrative organs to provide disputes cases for the programme. As a programme broadcasted on a daily basis, it was almost inevitable for *XLNJ* to experience a lack of cases, which led the department Vice Director to suggest all *XLNJ* directors[76] to look for first-hand cases from judicial administrative organs in sub-districts and communities. All directors then began cooperating with local mediators in the field.

While the *XLNJ* came out in the right place at the right time, according to Yin, its youthful production team also contributed to its success. When *XLNJ* was first established, the programme recruited young directors from other programmes in the New Entertainment Channel, who already knew each other. On the one hand, these young professionals adjusted to the new programme quickly and brought in fresh ideas. Most of them, however, did not have experience in making talk shows, let alone a newly-invented mediation show. As one of the directors told me, before joining the *XLNJ* programme team, they had worked on other shows that were mainly entertainment-focused[77]. They used to work with actors or celebrities, but *XLNJ* was the first time these young directors saw so many real disputes and met different kinds of people from a different level[78]. Moreover, during the first months of the programme, directors had to work closely with their cooperative district Judicial Administrative Stations (*sifa chu*) or sub-district offices (*jiedao ban*), observing and working together with mediators and looking for dispute cases for the show.

Indeed, the perfect timing and the cooperative team have been crucial for the success of the show. But in addition to these internal or structural factors, the external political context also appeared to be in its favour, which might explain why even the local government paid attention to the show (see Section 5.2.4 and Section 5.5). In October

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*Xiju Channel* (Colorful Traditional Chinese Opera). In October 2009, it has been reorganised and established Shanghai New Entertainment Media Ltd. Company.

[76] In the television sector of China's media industry, 'Directors' of recorded broadcasts are sometimes also called 'editors', because in practice, they are also in charge of editing their own programme of a series. They are called '*bian dao*' in Chinese, literally meaning director and editor. The terms, 'director' and 'editor' are interchangeable in this dissertation.

[77] Interview #4.

[78] Many interviewees (including Interviewees #1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8) mentioned that most of those people who came to the programme are from a relatively low level of education, occupation, and income.

2007, at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party in Beijing, Hu Jintao stressed the importance of implementing the scientific concept of development, building, and maintaining of social harmony and stability. The slogan 'Building a harmonious society' had become a hot topic and could be seen everywhere. Within this particular context, the programme was designed to cater to the government's mission. By televising the mediation of disputes among ordinary people, the show claims to be helpful in promoting social harmony, as it demonstrates an option to deal with family conflicts. In this light, the show appears to be more than a result of structural reorganisation of the SMG. Attracting the audience with dramatic issues and advertising itself as promoting social harmony, the show seems to be one that attempts to play up to both the audience and the authority.

Perspectives on the aims of the show vary from production staff to mediators, but there appears to be a general consensus that the show is to present real social issues to attract the audience while at the same time being careful to avoid politically sensitive issues. In other words, the show is seen to ensure social harmony while boosting audience ratings. By and large, programme makers and mediators see four inclusive and related aims of the show: marketing, social harmony, political, and educational aims. I will discuss these in their order of importance as seen by programme makers.

### *5.2.1 Marketing Aim*

The marketing aim seems to take up the first position as seen by the programme makers who often refer to the audience rating as a parameter for the success of the show. Indeed, since the media transformation, the fate of a programme is subject to its audience ratings and market share. Bearing in mind the marketing aim, the production team of *XLNJ* proposed the specific format of the show to target the audience's curiosity. But drawing the lesson from another local talk show focusing on individuals' emotional lives, *The Spiritual Garden*[79] (*Xinling Huayuan*), that was banned in 2008 by the SARFT for making up exaggerated, vulgar stories, *XLNJ* appears to exploit the audience's 'voyeuristic' demands in a cautious manner and found itself a niche in the market by collaborating with SJB.

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[79] The show invited a psychologist as co-presenter to help participants in relieving their mental stress. Stories in this show were found to be staged in order to attract an audience.

As initiator of the idea of a mediation show, *XLNJ* producer Yin has his particular rules in making television: 'What in your programme makes people feel they "must" watch it? Why does the audience, who you never met before, has to watch your programme at this time and not watch fifty or sixty other channels, but only yours?'[80] In his opinion, a good show should take the perspective of the common people and address what people are interested in. He feels that among various and diverse programmes, few have paid close attention to the actual lives of the people. He thinks that audiences need a programme that speaks for them, such as the first TV talk show[81] *The East Studio* (*Dongfang Zhiboshi*)[82] that focused on hot topics related to human sympathy and laws.

As reflected in the entire production phase, many decisions are made with the ultimate goal to attract the audience. The focus on family disputes, for instance, is the result of careful considerations to delicately balance between real-yet-sensitive social issues and sensational confessions. In the early days, the production team held several meetings about the orientation of the show. At that time, they decided to confine topics to disputes between individuals on the basis of several considerations; firstly is 'watchability' (attractiveness)[83]: topics about family disputes would strike a chord with many television audiences without arousing unnecessary troubles[84]; secondly, individual disputants certainly know their cases inside out and thus can tell a good story, while cases involving public institutions or organisations usually send legal representatives, who are usually not familiar with the dispute in question, to speak on behalf of them[85]. This 'signifies a boring conversation since these people usually talk nothing but clichés, and this will not attract audiences', says Yang, one of the directors who took part in the brainstorming stage and provided useful ideas[86]. He sees that an appropriate scope of topics is the key factor to the programme. In the same vein, directors began to look for a

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[80] Interview #1, interview during my field research in Shanghai in 2010.

[81] Although there were some programmes that involved discussion, media practitioners and scholars on Chinese media studies generally regard the *Oriental Studio* as the first TV talk show in China, which was followed by the famous *Talk Straight* (shi hua shi shuo) of the CCTV (see, for example, Zuo 2009).

[82] Started broadcasting in 1993 by the OTV, it was a hit in Shanghai.

[83] They use the word 'watchability' (可看性), which could also indicate whether the case is worth watching.

[84] Interviewee #1.

[85] Interviewees #1, 2, 5, and 7.

[86] Interviewee #3.

diversity of cases when they realised that the audience may be fed up with purely house property issues.

In addition to the careful selection of cases, the production team also integrated entertainment elements to meet both the demand from the market and the requirements from the television station. Like other programmes aired on the New Entertainment Channel, the show has been required to include entertaining parts to cover audiences of different ages[87]. As a consequence, since 2011 the audience commenters' session has been added to the show. The composition of audience commentators covers viewers of different ages and professions, reflecting opinions from different generations as some programme makers see it[88].

Moreover, various editing techniques were adopted, not only to enhance the 'attractiveness' but also to lay emphasis on the realness of the show. The producer believes that realness is 'the necessary nature that makes a programme sustain its popularity'[89]. In its early days, some viewers suspected that certain cases in the show were staged by amateur actors who also appeared on other programmes. Since then, the show has been striving to convince its audience of its authenticity, for example, displaying a logo saying 'real people, real issues (*zhenren zhenshi*)' on the right top of the screen[90].

It seems vital for a show to reach a large audience in order to succeed in a competitive market. The *XLNJ* is not an exception, as the marketing economic aim is its primary aim. Its 'close-to-life' approach provides the audience with real stories they can easily sympathise with. In this way, they attract a large audience and subsequently make a profit, and consequently become more or less economically independent.

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87 Interviewee #5 and also in an internal document circulated within the channel: it is required that programmes on the entertainment channel should integrate entertainment (*zongyi yuansu*) with the existing format.

88 Interviewees #2, 3, 5, and 20.

89 Interviewee #1.

90 Interviewee #3 told that most people did not know much about the show and they often refused to seek mediation on TV. It was very difficult for them as a new programme to persuade troubled families to come on the show, so the editors had to use the alternative way to represent a story, suggesting that several early broadcasts were staged.
Additionally, Interviewees #3, 5, and 7 have implied that a competing show broadcast on satellite channel *Happiness Magic Cube (Xingfu Mofang)* was staged by amateur performers.

### 5.2.2 *Promoting Social Harmony*

Despite the increasing number of programmes addressing various aspects of people's lives, according to the producer, little attention has actually been devoted to the life conditions of regular people, especially those living at the 'grass-roots' level. Since the 2008 decree, the SARFT required television practitioners to make programmes that wield positive influence in society (Daily, 2009). *XLNJ* aims to make up for the insufficient attention by addressing different causes of common family disputes among the audience[91].

There is a consensus among the core production team regarding the aim of the programme especially in terms of its expected role in the society. As they see it, cases on *XLNJ* can, to a large extent, represent common issues in society, as mediating a case on television gives the audience in similar situations an opportunity to resolve their own issues by drawing inferences about other cases[92]. In this light, the show is not only intended to help people to solve problems but also to play an exemplary role. One of the directors, Yang[93], uses an example to explain this role:

'Let's assume someone had a dispute with his close relatives like siblings and he has no idea what he should do. But he happens to watch our programme and sees other people in a similar situation to his own, and then he might also find the mediator's suggestions and advice are helpful to him. In this way the *XLNJ* guides him in the right direction to solving problems. Or let's say, someone he does not have family disputes but his neighbours, friends or colleagues have, in this situation, he can give other people suggestions for solution because he has already known about this.'

Other members of the production team[94] hold similar views to Yang's, believing that their programme has been playing an affirmative role in suggesting positive methods of conflict resolution. Some directors and TV mediators[95] consider *XLNJ* a manifestation

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[91] In many families, disputes often involved issues such as unemployment or arguments over house properties, etc. These were regarded as consequences brought by the economic reform. The sky-high housing costs, for example, become increasingly unaffordable to many people with average income. See Chapter One for a detailed elaboration of the social and economic background from which emerged the *XLNJ* mediation programme.

[92] Interviewees #1.2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 18, and 19.

[93] Interviewee #3.

[94] Interviewees # 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7.

[95] Interviewees #3, 4, 5, 18, and 19.

of the media's social responsibility. Such an opinion seems related to their close, down-to-earth engagement with disputing parties through interviewing or mediating[96]. In their opinion, the media—especially programmes like *XLNJ*—should make use of their influence in society to raise social attention and help people with their difficulties. For instance, in one episode, the disputant's difficult situation raised attention and generated public sympathy, and soon after the broadcast, they received help from the relevant institution and financial donations from the audience. In this way, the show builds up a caring and helping image in society, which conveys a message that disputes can be solved in a peaceful way and responds to the central call for a 'harmonious society'.

While the programme makers claim it as the media's social responsibility to reflect people's life status and help them with their disputes, the local government and propaganda department also play a role in setting this 'social harmony' aim. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Shanghai Television is owned by the Propaganda Department of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, meaning that programme production is under the guidance of the local municipal propaganda department. Collaborating with the Shanghai Justice Bureau, this aim of *XLNJ* therefore reflects the intention of the local authority. The Shanghai government and the Municipal Propaganda Department are satisfied that *XLNJ* plays an active role in promoting the 'social harmony' aim established by them (see Section 5.4 in this chapter).

### *5.2.3 Diverting Political Sensitivity*

Another aim of the show, as reflected in the pre-production phase, is diverting the attention from political sensitivities. Disputes on the show include various issues reflecting conflicts in families and in society, but cases and participants are carefully selected to avoid sensitive topics that could upset the government. The aforementioned talk show *The East Studio* provided a lesson that *XLNJ* learned from. The show was highly welcomed by the audience for its closeness to daily life and heated discussions on hot social issues; however, such overt discussion of sensitive topics worried the government, which led to the show's demise after less than two years.

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[96] Directors of the *XLNJ* kept close contact with disputants from the case collecting phase until the dispute has been solved. See Part 4 for a detailed description of the director's job responsibilities.

A similar situation happened to another popular talk show, *Discuss Together* (*You Hua Dajia Shuo*). The show featured discussions between professionals and the live audience on various issues of public concern, and participants often provided sharp comments in critical discussions. About one year later, the programme received instructions from the leadership of the TV station requesting it to avoid overt discussions on 'sensitive' issues. But soon after redirecting its topic focus, the show experienced a large loss in ratings and ultimately went off the air. Yin[97] previously used to work for this talk show, and he attested from such experience that the balance between audiences' viewership and politics is necessary for a programme to survive. Under his leadership, one does not seem to have any difficulty in identifying 'politically safe' topics.

As mentioned before, one selection rule is to include only disputes between individuals and not to involve institutions or organisations. The latter, such as labour disputes or medical disputes involving institutions or organisations, would make the issue sensitive because these organisations are likely to 'use some networks (*guan xi*) to intervene, (in which case) you may expect a notice from your leadership in a higher hierarchy asking you to drop the topic as they find it is inappropriate'[98]. Such interference from higher up the television station's hierarchy certainly affects choices of the production.

Being aware of the subtle tension between politics and the market, the show set its goal to divert the audience's attention from politically sensitive issues to non-sensitive family conflicts. In this way, the show is able to please not only the audience by presenting actual common issues in life, but also the authority by promoting mediation as an option for family disputes. In other words, the *XLNJ* played a role as facilitator and paternalistic guide to build and create a 'harmonious society'. An added value of carrying out this aim is that it enables the show to survive by avoiding conflicts with authorities. Being in line with the government policy of social harmony, the show carried out the political aim through its collaboration with the Justice Bureau as well as by avoiding political sensitivities.

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[97] Interviewee #1.

[98] Interviewee #3.

### 5.2.4 Educational Aim

Both programme makers and ordinary mediators share the opinion that the show can enlighten the audience about legal issues and policies relevant to their lives. They see people's mediation on *XLNJ* as simple, economic, efficient, and beneficial for a harmonious relationship between people. Among the well-known TV-mediators, one is a member of the Shanghai People's Congress[99]; she considers that the aim of the show is to publicise moral virtues and improve public moral consciousness. She finds that 'moral values are deteriorating today' as a consequence of economic reforms, and that the mediation show 'is doing the correct thing to remind us the importance of our traditional virtues such as *"respecting the old and cherishing the young"* … (the aim of) *XLNJ* is to help ordinary people and also to improve social morality…'.

Another mediator, Pei Zhen[100], also a delegate to the Shanghai People's Congress, indicates that the show educates the audience with basic legal knowledge. Pei used to be lawyer, and after his retirement, he has been working as a legal consultant in a local neighbourhood committee and finds that many disputants have little knowledge about regulations or policies. As he sees it, strengthening the publicity of policies and legal education is one of the aims of the show.

Also from a legal perspective, in a 2008 seminar discussing the *XLNJ* show, Liu Zhongding, the Deputy Director of the SJB, expressed his approval of the show: 'through the mediation of a typical case, *XLNJ* educates the audience about relevant legal knowledge and also points out where to turn to when disputes occur in life… mediation on television is a process of publicity of law' (Cao 2009). Ordinary mediators[101] share the opinion that the show enhances public awareness of laws and at the same time promotes the work of people's mediation.

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[99] Interviewee #18.

[100] Interviewee #15.

[101] Interviewees #9, 10, 11, and 12.

## 5.3 Production of *XLNJ*

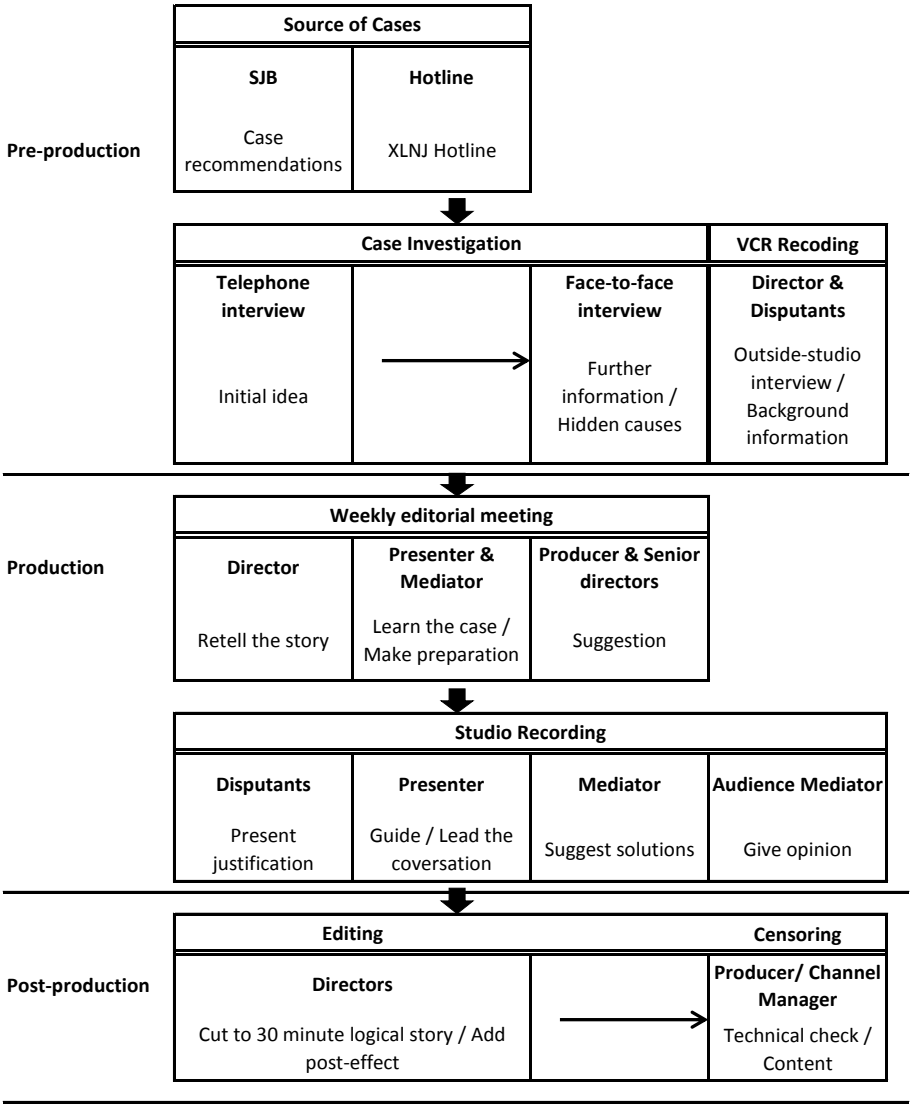
With these four aims, the programme strives to play up to both audience and authorities. Audience rating is crucial to the show, as it may determine its broadcast life. So the marketing aim is to attract a large audience, while also at the same time gaining profit and keeping the show partially independent in financial terms. The fact that Shanghai Television is under the control of the Propaganda Department means the show has to be cautious. The show apparently drew a lesson from the precedent that it not only avoids sensitive topics but also caters to the authority by putting itself in line with the government's 'harmony' call and collaborating with the local justice bureau, with the two more political aims (the second and the third aim) in mind. In the same sense, the educational aim tends to meet the needs from both sides, providing the audience with what they might need and promoting legal knowledge at the same time.

These aims are integrated into the entire production, which consists of three phases: pre-production, the preparation stage where information about cases is collected; production, the studio filming stage where disputes are mediated; and post-production, the final stage before broadcasting where editors apply the final touches to the show. Figure 5.1 shows the production flow of *XLNJ*.

### *5.3.1 Pre-Production*

The pre-production is the preparation stage for the programme, including case collection and case investigation. Collection of cases had previously been done by directors working in the field with local judicial branches, while now most of the time the hotline office has become the main facility collecting topics for *XLNJ*. The directors then carry out case investigation through telephone and in-person interviews to learn the causes of the dispute and both parties' expectations of the mediation.

**Figure 5.1 Production Flow of *XLNJ***




The source of disputes was a major concern for *XLNJ* in its early days when it had not built up its reputation and credibility among the audience. In its early days, the show relied heavily on support from the SJB to provide dispute cases and recommend adequate mediators. The five programme directors worked closely with sub-district judicial

branches to follow the work procedure and to find suitable cases[102]. In this light, the SJB-affiliated justice divisions functioned as channels through which suitable cases became visible to the production team[103]. Programme makers believed that judicial offices, as authoritative departments, were able to persuade disputants to try TV mediation as an option, and they also expected an abundant source of cases[104].

The intimate collaboration with local judicial offices at the time benefited the production team: firstly, it familiarised the production team with a concrete idea of the actual mediation work through practical work in the field[105], which inspired them to simplify the procedure and adjust the style of civil mediation to suit the television medium[106]. Secondly, through working with local mediators, the production team was able to find suitable candidates who later became regular TV mediators on the show[107]. In addition, working at the scene allows the directors to make decisions more quickly depending on first-hand information and to build up their contacts with local mediators for information when new cases come up[108].

The collaboration with local judicial offices has, however, gradually diminished. This is partly because *XLNJ* began to receive numerous telephone calls every day following its increasing popularity among audiences[109]. But the main cause seems to be the bureaucracy in the judicial organisations that led to the end of the collaboration. When the SJB started the collaboration with *XLNJ*, they adopted an incentive mechanism

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[102] There were 17 administrative divisions in Shanghai (16 districts and one county); every director was responsible for collaborating with 3 or 4 local sub-district offices. Directors usually spent 3 or sometimes 4 days a week following and observing the mediator's work. They had to pay several visits to those who have a dispute, talking to them and determining the appropriate solution for both dispute parties (Interviewee #4).

[103] China has established people's mediation committees in village (neighbourhood) committees, townships or towns (urban districts), and enterprises and public institutions, as well as industries and sectors with a high frequency of occurrence of disputes; see Chapter Two.

[104] Interviewees #1, 3, and 5.

[105] Most directors were not familiar with the actual mediation work before they started working for *XLNJ*.

[106] The civil mediation normally takes 7-10 days to solve one case, which often requires the civil mediator to visit disputants' family or friends to collect information. It costs more time and work than the mediation on TV (Interviewees #10 and 12).

[107] In early broadcasts, mediators from almost all of the 17 administrative divisions have come to carry out their mediation work at *XLNJ*. While most of them appeared to be nervous when talking in front of the camera, there were several mediators who were doing professional work and subsequently became regular mediators at *XLNJ*.

[108] Interviewees #1.2, 2, 3, and 5.

[109] Interviewee #1.

to encourage the mediators to work actively with programme directors[110]. In other words, if a case recommended by the mediator was accepted and made into a programme, the mediator would receive a financial bonus. But later, the collaboration became complicated as the programme directors needed to contact personnel at justice offices before they got in touch directly with the mediators. The complicated and replicated processes have eventually led to mediators being less interested in collaboration. As a result, fewer cases were recommended by judicial branches.

The programme hotline has acquired greater importance as a source of dispute cases[111]. The hotline crew, consisting of five middle-aged females, plays an important role in the pre-production phase in answering calls and choosing dispute cases. Some of these hotline receptionists had previously worked in neighbourhood committees and thus are experienced in dealing with different people and circumstances[112]. Their job is to take brief notes about the caller's contact information, create a general outline of the dispute, and determine whether both parties to the dispute are willing to go on television. They would make initial judgements about whether the case could be used for television mediation or not. It was based on three unwritten rules[113]; though not mandatory, they guide the selection of cases: 1) parties to disputes should be individual people who are willing to go on the show, not involving official bodies and organisations; for example, disputes regarding house demolition issues would not be accepted for the show as they usually involve government departments like demolition offices; 2) disputes should not merely focus on housing problems with which, programme makers believe, audiences have been fed up already; 3) disputes need to be clear and possible to be mediated according to civil law.

Hotline receptionists are not specifically trained to answer calls, nor does it seem necessary. They do not see any difficulty in answering calls and recording notes. Although

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[110] Interviewee #3.

[111] Interviewees #2 and 7.

[112] Interviewee #14.

[113] The receptionists say they have no exact standards or criteria for selecting topics. But based on my interviews with other members of the core production team (Interviewees #1.1, 1.2, 3, 4, 6, and 7), I noticed that there are actually unwritten rules that have been applied in selecting cases.

the four hotlines receive approximately 200 calls each day, less than 10 percent match the selection criteria and can be used for television broadcast[114].

Before a case is mediated in the studio, directors interview both disputing parties in person and then create a storyline for the subsequent filming and editing (see Sections 5.3.2 and 5.3.3). According to the directors[115], the cases selected usually include but are not limited to conflicts between in-laws, disloyalty in marriage, arguments between parents and children, disagreements between siblings over issues regarding supporting their parents and/or distribution of property, and children and property issues for middle-aged re-married couples.

### *5.3.2 Production Phase*

Mediation of a dispute is carried out and filmed in the studio during the production phase, which consists of two parts: editorial meeting and studio recording. The editorial meeting is closely related to the production of the show, as it is when relevant decisions are made by the producer and the directors. Therefore, I include it here as part of the production phase.

The producer, the chief editor, directors, show presenters, and the relevant mediator will have a regular weekly editorial meeting—the 'storytelling meeting' (*jiang gushi hui*),[116]--on the day before studio filming. The main purpose of the meeting is to discuss the mediation plan and prepare the presenter and the mediator for the filming next day. During the meeting, the directors on duty present the storyline of the case and explain the major issue and what disputants expect for the resolution. Usually the mediator will be assigned by the producer and the chief editor depending on his or her expertise, mediation skills, and intervention style[117].

The meeting ensures communication between the core production team, where the producer and the chief editor usually provide opinions and suggestions on the production plan. For instance, on a case about three brothers' argument over the caring of their

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[114] Interviewee #14.

[115] Interviewees # 3, 4, and 5.

[116] As called by the production team; Interviewees #1.2., 2, 4, and 7.

[117] Interviewees #1.2, 2, 3, and 5.

mother and the distribution of house property[118], both the producer and the chief editor suggested that the mediator should make more efforts to remind the disputants of the kinship, love, and affection they used to have, and place less emphasis on the property.

After the editorial meeting, the presenter and the mediator usually agree on the mediation plan, which improves their co-operation during the studio mediation stage. The division of labour between the presenter and the mediator is clear-cut. The presenter is responsible for guiding the conversation to lay out the case to the audience, and then the mediator will start to mediate. As mentioned in Chapter Two, disputants sometimes fly into a rage and will literally fight with each other. Therefore, the presenter at this stage plays an important role in keeping the situation under control[119]. The director on duty holds the responsibility for the general control of the production; that is, keeping the length of recording time under three hours and ensuring that mediation does not diverge from the planned framework[120].

In addition to the core production team, the technical support team[121] is also involved in the production stage. They work for *XLNJ* only on filming days. The studio crew appear to be largely indifferent to the programme content because the hours recording recurring disputes that 'are all much of a muchness, arguing over money or house' [122] might bore them.

The organisational structure is characterised by a hierarchical division of labour between the intellectual and technical teams. The core production team is the driving force of the production, which has decision-making power, while the studio crew functions as a 'mechanistic' system, playing the role of technical 'doers' (Elliott 1972, Senge 2006).

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[118] This is a case that I observed during my field observation.

[119] Interviewees #1.2 and 7.

[120] Concluded by the author based on field observation and interviewees # 2, 5, and 7.

[121] Here, I refer to the camera crew and the technical support staff (for example, audio and visual control) as the studio crew since both of them participate in the studio production phase and are peripherally involved with the programme in terms of its content and implication.

[122] Interviewee #8. Mediation in the studio can take two to four hours for one case, which is unpredictable and largely subject to the case and disputants. Normally, four cases need to be filmed in one day, meaning that the technical team has to work in the studio for more than 10 hours. It might make them bored so that during the recording, some cameramen would read the newspaper or play games on their iPads.

### 5.3.3 Post-Production

While it rests with the directors to achieve the final editing of each episode of *XLNJ*, they have to follow some rules. Firstly, they edit the lengthy mediation into a logical 30-minute programme according to the storyline and mediation plan. Generally, they keep the crucial clues related to the main issues of the dispute arguments, and cut out repetitive arguments and what they regard as less relevant parts. Besides, the higher level of hierarchy in the television station or the municipal propaganda department sometimes provides instructions in terms of the content of the show. The instructions are usually given in the form of internal documents or oral notice by the producer, which inform the directors to meet certain requirements when creating the show. There is indirect interference from channel directors, the SJB, and the political (propaganda) department during the production phase. But the directors do not see any difficulty in meeting these requirements, which suggests that they actually anticipate certain interference. The interference during the post-production is mostly related to the style of the programme.

For instance, in an internal file, the producer shared with his editors clear instructions regarding the editing of the show, based on the general requirements for television production established by the SARFT. According to the guide, a single 30-minute episode should comprise a trailer (about two minutes) at the beginning, and at least five captions highlighting crucial clues or suspense points. Advertisements will be inserted in the middle of the show, so in practice, the director would typically use five or more highlighting captions to link sections before and after the advertisement, reminding the audience about the plot of the previous section[123]. To attract a wide audience, the show is subtitled[124] with phrase captions in a way that triggers the viewers' curiosity, such as 'are there any unknown secrets about the disputants (*huweirenzhi de mimi*)?' or 'what facts do our disputant wish to hide (*nanyan de yinqing*)?' The show uses this method of editing as an effort to achieve the marketing aim. Driven by the social harmony and educational aim, the editing also takes into account the professional ethics such that

[123] At the beginning of the show, a narrator would introduce both disputing parties and the disagreement between them. This voice-over is used throughout the show with the same purpose as that of the subtitles, linking clues together.

[124] The mediation is carried out in Shanghai dialects; the Chinese subtitles would help viewers from outside of Shanghai to understand the content.

participants' real names will not be revealed and swearing, cursing, or insulting words are cut out or muted.

Once the editing is finished, the tape needs to be checked and censored three times by the director, the chief editor and the producer, and the director of the channel, respectively, before it is broadcast. The directors themselves are to ensure that the edited episodes follow the editing instructions and that the storyline is logical. The chief editor and the producer play an important role in censoring the content; they must review the content in terms of technical and ideological aspects as instructed by the upper-level hierarchy of the television station and the municipal propaganda department[125]. They not only check if there are any typographical errors in subtitles or the use of captions, but also have to ensure that the show provides correct guidance to the public and a positive image of mediation[126], responding to the call from the central government. The chief editor, as specified in an internal document, has the responsibility to review the programme tape, ensuring that the show gives correct and healthy ideological guidance to the public (*daoxiang zhengque, sixiang jiankang*). This reviewing work should be done every time when the show rebroadcast on TV[127].

## 5.4 Issues of Contentions

The three phases of production reflect the aims of the show, from selecting cases to avoiding politically sensitive issues, collaborating with the SJB to promote social harmony and legal knowledge, to elaborate editing to attract audiences. The four aims as seen by the programme makers seem to be well integrated into every decision made during the production phase. Meanwhile, there are tensions during the entire phase of production from the collaboration with the SJB at the beginning to the final editing phase. In this

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[125] Interviewees #1.2, 2, and 5; According to the internal document I accessed during fieldwork, certain instructions may come from the SARFT and/or Shanghai Propaganda Department. Such as the aforementioned 'Opinion Concerning Further Strengthening Comprehensive Satellite Television Channel Programme Management' issued in 2011 by the SARFT, also called 'cutback on TV entertainment program' (*Xian yu ling*).

[126] Interviewees #1.2 and 2.

[127] Also, according to the internal document I accessed during fieldwork, certain instructions may come from the SARFT and/or Shanghai Propaganda Department. This includes the aforementioned 'Opinion Concerning Further Strengthening Comprehensive Satellite Television Channel Programme Management' issued in 2011 by the SARFT, also called 'cutback on TV entertainment program' (*Xian Yu Ling*).

section, I will discuss the major issues of contention and how programme makers deal with such tensions.

### 5.4.1 Collaboration with SJB

As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, the show benefited from the collaboration with the Shanghai Justice Bureau to establish its reputation and credibility in the early days. At the same time, there were tensions rooted in the intrinsic differences of values and perspectives between television practitioners and officers from the judicial institution. The professional values could lead programme makers and judicial officers to have different opinions towards the same dispute. Local civil mediators tend to take care of all requests by the disputants, which therefore require much time and energy spent not only in the pre-mediation investigation[128] and mediation phase, but also involve re-visiting the disputants after the mediation[129]. By comparison, the show directors cannot cover every appeal made by the disputants but have to select one or two main issues that can be presented on television. The previously mentioned selection criteria leave the directors limited space to make choices. For local civil mediators, there are fewer boundaries than in TV mediation. In fact, they deal with a wider range of cases in their everyday work, from inter-personal disputes to those involving social organisations such as house-demolition or labour disputes[130], most of which are avoided in the *XLNJ*. Different understandings of mediation work and television production makes the collaboration less smooth than it appears. The directors rely on local mediators to identify and recommend cases, but often they reject the recommendations as they do not fit the selection criteria or lack representativeness to be shown on television[131]. In this sense, local mediators actually have the power to make choices, while the directors are in a passive position without having access to disputants directly or having much say in selecting cases.

In this sense, the case selection process with local justice branches is time-consuming and energy-demanding for both sides. In spite of the incentive

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[128] Collecting information, visit disputants' family, neighbours, and/or work unit to learn as much as possible.

[129] Interviewees #10, 11, and 12.

[130] Interviewee #10.

[131] Interviewee #3.

mechanism, the bureaucratic structure affects local mediators' enthusiasm in searching for appropriate cases for the show. Meanwhile, from the perspective of the programme makers, the time and energy they invest into the case selection does not ensure a satisfying result. It seems that the production team desires to alter their role in the collaboration and attempts to gain control in case selection. Their reliance, after a few years, on the hotline to collect and select dispute cases suggests their desire to obtain decision-making power in the pre-production phase.

The unspoken tensions led to the termination of the actual collaboration. It now exists in name only and works more as an endorsement than as a practical mechanism. *XLNJ* continues to advertise itself as 'collaborating and co-produced with Shanghai Justice Bureau' though there is almost no practical connection. Both the SJB and the show seem to benefit from such a 'surface' collaboration. For the production team, they not only save time and energy, but also successfully gain the autonomy to select cases themselves. For the SJB, the show continues to promote people's mediation[132]. In fact, the Shanghai government and municipal propaganda department were satisfied with the show's performance in educating people in society when they held several academic seminars to discuss TV mediation with academic experts and social scientists (see section 5.5).

### *5.4.2 Insufficient Case Source and Producer's Concern*

While the production team gains the power of case selection and establishes hotlines as a source of cases, this does not mean that they have access to these cases in abundance. As a daily broadcast show, *XLNJ* has a large demand for such cases. The choices left after the filtration are not plentiful, especially in light of daily broadcasts. Most cases are turned down because they are beyond the selection range[133]. In spite of the limited sources, the programme makers claim the necessity of reducing house-related disputes for the sake of the audience's preference. In order to have a general picture of topics covered in the show, I carried out a simple content analysis of *XLNJ* episodes aired in 2013 to check whether house-related issues are indeed limited, and if so, what topics are covered

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[132] Interviewee #10.

[133] Interviewees #3 and 5.

instead[134]. Among the 140 cases I collected, nearly 70 percent (97) of cases mediated on *XLNJ* involved arguments between couples[135]; a few cases occurred between parents and adult children (33) or involved in-law disputes (18); and there were only seven cases involving siblings. I identified eight common types of disputes that often give rise to domestic disputes (see Table 5.1), and family disputes on the show usually involve more than one issue. Although the programme makers claimed less emphasis on house-related issues, the result indicates the opposite – more than half (73) of cases were raised due to disagreements on the distribution of family properties. It seems quite close to the technical team's observation that most issues are related to housing and money. After house-related issues, differences in perspectives or values and disloyalty in marriage are other frequent causes for family disputes. Additionally, domestic violence seems to be a noteworthy issue that occurs more than topics such as supporting the elderly or rearing children.

As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, disputes related to property distribution originally seemed to appear so frequently on the show that programme makers feared that it would lower the audience's interest in watching. The statistical analysis of Table 5.1 indicates a seemingly opposite result of the producer's concern, and there is a significant relation between property disputes and audience ratings. This suggests that, compared with other types of topics, financial disputes are more likely to attract audiences. Neither did the programme makers actually reduce the number of topics on houses, nor did the audience seem to lose interest. To my knowledge, until the time of my fieldwork interviews, no proper survey had been conducted on the audience of the mediation show. The programme makers' misinterpretation of the audience's preference was therefore subjective or suggested by the authorities, and not supported by substantial proof. In other words, it might not be the audience who was fed up with housing issues, but the programme makers possibly instigated by the authorities. This may well reflect the programme makers' anxiety about the regime's attitude.

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[134] Cases are selected every other week. In total, 183 episodes were selected, which consist of 140 cases. See Chapter Five for the methodology I used in analysis.

[135] A couple here includes both (re)married couples and unmarried ones.

**Table 5.1 Analysis of *XLNJ* broadcast every other week in 2013**

| Dispute Issues | Dependent Variable Audience Rating | |
|---|---|---|
| | Coefficient (S.E.) | Frequency (%) |
| Disputes involving housing and/or money | 0.386*** (0.146) | 73 (52%) |
| Disputes due to different perspectives | 0.038 (0.168) | 38 (27%) |
| Disputes involving disloyalty in marriage | 0.003 (0.174) | 30 (21%) |
| Disputes involving domestic violence | 0.017 (0.173) | 25 (18%) |
| Disputes involving other topics | 0.298* (0.171) | 24 (17%) |
| Disputes involving child rearing | 0.055 (0.225) | 13 (9%) |
| Disputes involving supporting elderly | 0.569** (0.254) | 10 (7%) |
| Disputes due to gambling | -0.272 (0.314) | 6 (4%) |
| Constant | 4,831 (0.17) | |
| N | 140 | |
| R-Squared | 0.126 | |

**Note:**

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, ***p<0.01;

N=140; Average rating=5.13

But it seems difficult for the producer and directors to reduce the number of house-related conflicts. The tight supply of cases leaves little possibility to reject house-related issues. Hotline receptionists may play the role of gatekeeper in selecting cases for the show, but in fact they do not have much choice. In spite of the hundreds of calls every day, the usability of cases is less than 5 percent because some people call for suggestions, and some only wish to have private mediation[136]. This also reflects a real social issue in a large city like Shanghai, where house prices have increased rapidly in the

[136] Interviewee 1; see also Section 3.1.

recent years, making it difficult for ordinary people to afford a home. On the one hand, the city's house demolition project often provides people with an opportunity to improve their life in terms of both living condition and financial status[137]. On the other, whose name shall be on the property deed can often be a potential trigger for family disputes. Arguments on financial matters seem to be a common issue in Chinese society, due to the rapid and uneven economic development. Under such circumstances, it would not be feasible for the production team to filter out all of the cases that involve house-related arguments. It seems, in some sense, not that programme makers select the cases, but that the cases seek them out, instead.

The political tension here reflects the recurring house-related disputes and the programme makers' anxiety related to the authority's attitude. Housing-related issues often inevitably require policies and regulations. Learning lessons from similar programmes in the past, the producer is aware that discussions involving such topics might become sensitive for the government. Perhaps this also partly explains why he has been insisting that the show does not focus on housing issues. On the other hand, however, the lack of cases leaves programme makers little room to bypass disputes on house properties. They have to compromise and loosen the selection criteria, which therefore explains the frequency of house-related disputes. While housing issues seem to be inevitable, the mediation approach that TV mediators adopt seems to help to minimise the discussion on such topics by guiding disputants to walk in others' shoes and emphasising harmony in the family.

### *5.4.3 Face Matters*

In addition to the criterion of a topic range that confines the scope of the show, there is another factor that explains the low turn-out rate of hotline call-ins, which is the privacy concern, i.e. face issues. Although the show allows participants to disguise themselves by wearing hats and sunglasses, many people are still intimidated by the idea of showing their face to the public. In the early days, when *XLNJ* collaborated with the SJB, the concern of losing face was already a major reason preventing people from going on the show.

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[137] Families to be relocated are provided an apartment and/or a subsidy; the size of apartment and amount of subsidy is decided based upon the number of residents registered on the same *hukou*. See, for example, Deng, Hoekstra, and Elsinga (2014) for more information on the relocation policy in China.

Disputants hesitated to go for mediation on television though they could expect the same effect as mediation from judicial offices[138]. The reason seems apparent: 'If one can get a problem solved in private, why bother telling it to the public?'[139]

Perhaps this hesitation is understandable since people had not been accustomed to televised mediation at that time. However, the situation does not seem to have improved much now that mediation shows have become popular today. As the producer said, 'less than 100 out of 300 callers might be willing to have televised mediation, and in the end, no more than 10 will actually show up'[140]. This estimate reflects the production team's concern of insufficient cases. People might change their mind at the last minute, though they do not recognise 'losing face' as a problem for disputants as they 'have nothing to lose'[141].

Essential for the making of a mediation show is that both parties to the dispute will present their case so that the mediator can hear both sides and show that the meditation is fair and just. However, the programme makers realise that the participants' unpredictable decisions may affect the production of the show, so they compromise to minimise this influence. Among the 140 cases I reviewed, 39 cases (28 percent) lack the presence of the other party. Following the compromise on house-related issues, it seems that the production team has also come to terms with only one party's presence to ensure that they have sufficient supply for the daily broadcast. On the one hand, the production team wants to present a fair and balance image of mediation on TV. On the other hand, they compromise to survive in the market.

### *5.4.4 Entertainisation & Market Needs*

From the perspective of programme making, it is important to present disputing parties not only to signify fairness, but also to provide a balanced argument and drama that attracts viewers. Arguments between disputants sometimes escalate into outbursts of emotion or even literal fighting on the spot, which programme makers believe attracts the audience. In this sense, the missing presence of one party is likely to make the show less

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[138] Interviewee #2,5,7
[139] Interviewee #2.
[140] Interviewee #1.
[141] Interviewee #1.

interesting for the audience. With one aim of the show being to achieve success in the market, to make up for the unbalanced presence of both parties, the programme makers tend to entertainise the show as a means to enhance the audience's interest.

The directors of the show mostly have experience in creating entertainment programmes, so they seem to know how to make a story appeal to the audience's needs. In order to sustain their interest in watching, directors place emphasis on the emotional aspects of the issue. The editing aspect thus becomes crucial where directors would cut hour-long mediation into a story reflecting complicated interpersonal emotions and human feelings and for the rest use sub-titles or voice-overs. This method of editing is similar to the once-popular confessional talk shows that were eye-catching and sensational by exploiting personal relationships, but they were often scripted. Directors use editing skills to generate voyeuristic curiosity among the audience and maintain their interest in watching the show.

In a similar vein, *XLNJ* tends to play to the gallery by presenting stories about love and hate that resonate or trigger controversies (Yang 2012). The directors also make video clips filmed at the disputants' home, to illustrate the background of the case to the audience as well as allowing for more 'organised' drama. Moreover, the show constantly adjusts its format by including entertaining factors to maintain its freshness. For instance, audience mediators introduced in 2011 to observe the process of mediation, provided opportunities to vote and to express opinions to play the role of a jury committee.

The decision to include entrainment elements reflects the market-driven motive to sustain the audience's interests. While all of these entertaining approaches make the show eye-catching, they trigger the debate about whether the show is voyeuristic at the cost of people's privacy, dramatised at the cost of realness, and market-driven at the cost of pedagogy. This challenge might not be what directors expect, since they consider themselves socially responsible in educating, helping, and guiding their viewers[142]. But being a programme on an entertainment channel means that *XLNJ* has to entertain and enlighten the audience at the same time, integrating the marketing aim with the educational aim. The issue of contention here is the combination of marketing-driven entertainment with the otherwise serious and real civil mediation. Programme makers are

[142] Interviewees #3 and 5.

aware of the consequence of an unbalanced combination of these two in that excessively sensational issues may arouse criticism like that associated with confessional talk shows, while too little entertainment may not intrigue the audience. Either of these two situations would put the show at risk, making it difficult to please both the authority and the market.

### *5.4.5 Self-Censorship, Political Sensitivity, and Harmonious Society*

The media production process involves much more than just satisfying the audience. In fact, the public is not the first audience a producer has in mind. As Parenti (1992, 202) said, 'if something is to be shown, it must first please its financial backers, its would-be sponsors, the studios, and the networks. It is with these interests that the producer has the most direct interaction'. In a similar vein, it seems to the producer of *XLNJ* that it is necessary to satisfy the leadership of the television station, the local propaganda department, and the local government. As part of the media reform, the production and broadcast of television programmes have been separated to encourage creative and diverse production, but this does not mean that shows like *XLNJ* can cover any types of issues without permission from higher levels in the hierarchy. In fact, the producer had several discussions with the channel manager and other senior colleagues regarding the content, format, and the range of topics of the show.

The mediation show, as a consequence of the organisational restructuring of the television station (see Chapter Two), remains under the administration of the media group. Occasionally, the local propaganda department or the higher leadership in the television station would intervene in the production in terms of its content, style, and/or editing. The indirect intervention can take the form of written or oral notices, and is often accompanied by financial incentives. The director's failure to meet the requirements would lead to a reduction of his annual bonus.

From the programme makers' perspective, they seem not unhappy with certain indirect intervention. They do not mind producing special issues during public holidays to respond to the general festive atmosphere and sing the praises of the harmonious society. In fact, they feel that it is necessary to provide the audience with 'something different from the usual'[143]. It seems that the producer and the directors have become accustomed

[143] Interviewee #3.

to indirect intervention or censorship. When the producer Yin told me about how he learned from past experience in dealing with potentially politically sensitive issues[144], he said, 'There are different constraints for television workers, and I have long been used to that, we know what to cover and what not… we are trained to make television in a certain way.' His opinions are shared by other television practitioners in CCTV, which reveal an underlying truth that self-censorship has become ingrained in Chinese television practitioners' professional code (Zhu 2012). The producer does not attempt to push the boundaries and touch on sensitive topics; also, there is the pragmatic reason that such issues are too divisive for audiences and therefore potentially harmful to ratings. As Zhang Xiaoling (2007) expresses it, 'Caught between stern decrees and restrictions on the one hand, and swimming in a "sea of commercialization" on the other,' few media practitioners are inclined to risk their jobs to challenge the status quo.

The above situation to a large extent explains why the show makers insist on confining the range of disputes to domestic inter-personal ones despite the frequency of house-related cases or the incomplete presence of both parties. Even in the face of a tight resource, they do not plan to go beyond this established boundary. Television practitioners are like businessmen in the sense that they avert political risk and work within the system in order to preserve economic profits (Zhu 2012). As for the *XLNJ*, the association with the governmental department has seemed to further strengthen its position in the market; the show's producers do not perceive that as a contentious issue.

## 5.5 Conclusion

The production of television is a comprehensive process that requires consideration from different perspectives. Programme makers have a set of aims in mind when producing the show. These seemingly exclusive aims are in fact intrinsically related and potentially conflicting. The show attracts the audience by presenting sensational and non-political issues and/or sustaining their interests in watching by offering them the opportunity to get more than entertainment out of the show. In the same vein, the show reinforces its aim of promoting social harmony by avoiding politically sensitive issues but educating the public about the law. Under the Hu-Wen administration, media practitioners were urged

[144] Interviewee #1, one casual conversation that took place spontaneously during my fieldwork.

to make a balanced representation and to contribute to the overall goal of societal harmony (Zhu 2008). The show's presentation of solutions to 'inharmonious' social issues—though confined to a limited range—exhibits the programme makers' response to the efforts made by the government to reduce the level of public unrest as part of the more general goal of 'building a harmonious society'. By deliberately avoiding issues that will upset the government, the show avoids the fate of the precedent talk shows and therefore secures its place in the market. In this sense, the marketing aim and the social harmony aim are reciprocal.

By and large, tensions exist throughout the production of the show in terms of the political, media marketisation, and face-saving matters. Firstly, there is tension between the pursuit of commercial profit and political sensitivities. Television practitioners in China exhibit a clear understanding of the subtle relation between programmes and politics. Rather than pushing the envelope to touch on heated social conflicts, the show strategically collaborates with the local justice bureau in the hope of securing its place in the market. Undoubtedly, the endorsement from the justice bureau not only enhances the show's credibility among the audience, but also yields appreciation from the government. The last thing programme makers want is to upset the government as previous shows did. Therefore, programme makers and TV mediators manage to shift the emphasis away from the topic and onto the value of family and harmonious relations in society, while they realise that housing issues are inevitable in the show.

The marketisation and re-structuring of the television sector required the show to blend in entertaining elements with otherwise serious civil mediation. It is clear that the show is made more interactive and attractive with the participation of audience mediators and the use of catchy titles during the post-production editing. For programme makers, the entertainment in the show functions as a useful means to weaken the potential politically sensitive nature, while at the same time increasing the audience's interest. But the show's producers have to be cautious not to cross the line to be over-entertainised or 'sensational and vulgar', for which the SARFT criticised other programmes. In this sense, programme makers seem fine with the censorship if it is necessary to satisfy the Propaganda Department.

Regarding the cultural aspect, the mediation show is somewhat paradoxical in nature in the sense that it promotes harmony by presenting domestic disputes to the public, which is considered 'losing face' in the Chinese culture. Rooted in Chinese

traditional culture, the use of televised mediation as a possible solution to wash domestic 'dirty linen' highlights the tension between tradition and modernity. As for the show, it seems that individuals' faces can be 'sacrificed' to the central call for social harmony. This is perhaps why the producer tends to downplay the face issue when he explains that 'people (who turn to mediation on TV) have nothing to lose'. With *XLNJ* and similar shows becoming popular, the face issue seems to be further fading out, as people seem to become accustomed to this 'forth form of mediation' (Li 2009). Therefore, although the show challenges the traditional value of 'face', as it publicises personal issues to please the audience's voyeuristic demands, it justifies such an approach by placing emphasis on the assistance and likely satisfying result one can gain from TV mediation.

However, the popularity of mediation shows might be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it promotes civil mediation. The ordinary People's Mediators[145] from local judicial offices or neighbourhood committees feel that more people have started to come for advice since the broadcast of *XLNJ*. One of them[146] thinks that people who previously did not know or felt reluctant to discuss domestic issues with neighbourhood committees now accept mediation as a way to resolve disputes. On the other hand, however, the mediation show gives the audience a mistaken impression that disputes mediation could be done in a couple of hours, an illusion of how mediation works. Mediators[147] indicate that the mediation on TV is quite different from their real work. As Zhang[148] says, 'it seems very efficient that they (TV mediators) solve a dispute in 30 minutes, but it is impossible in life… it takes much longer'. Other mediators also mention that it usually takes them at least one or two weeks to solve a dispute. In that sense, TV mediation is pseudo-scripted mediation.

Despite the inherent contradictions of the show, it has apparently succeeded in attracting attention from the government as well as academia. Two seminars were held in 2008 and 2010 respectively discussing the popular phenomenon of the *XLNJ* mediation show (Cao 2009, Li 2010b). The 2008 seminar participants included, among others, a reviewer from the News Inspection Group (*Xinwen Ducha Zu*) of the Shanghai

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145 Interviewees #9, 10, 11, and 12.

146 Interviewee #12.

147 Interviewees #9, 10, and 12.

148 Interviewee #9.

Propaganda Department (SPD), an official from the SPD, the Deputy Director of the Shanghai Justice Bureau, the Deputy CEO of the Shanghai Media Group, and two sociology professors. During this seminar, SPD officials and other participants saw *XLNJ* as a promising show and approved of its social influence in solving social issues and promoting mediation (Cao 2009). The 2010 seminar was held by the Shanghai Sociological Association and involved sociologists from universities to explore the possibility of strengthening television mediation. To enhance the mediation on TV, it was suggested that dispute cases should go beyond the scope of family issues and extend outside the studio (Li 2010b).

By and large, it seems that programme makers, government officials, and mediators look upon the show favourably. Being at the receiving end of the show, the audience might or might not have the same impression. To explore their uses and perceptions of the show, an online survey and a focus group have been conducted separately.

# Chapter Six

# ONLINE SURVEY

## 6.1 Introduction

Since its first day, the mediation show *Xin Lao NiangJiu* (新老娘舅, *XLNJ*) has achieved and maintained a high audience rating for more than 7 years. Over the past years, it has frequently been in the top three rankings on the Entertainment Channel[149]. As discussed in Chapter Five, the show is by nature characterised by a complex format: on the one hand, it collaborates with the Shanghai Justice Bureau (SJB) and claims to respond to the call of the Hu-Wen government to promote harmony in society[150]; while on the other hand, it is showing conflict and flies in the face of the traditional Chinese saving-face cultural value. In addition, the show blends commercial and entertainment elements to attract television viewers.

As revealed in the previous chapter, programme makers and mediators perceive four aims of the show, to pursue market profit and maintain social harmony while at the same time educating the public about legal knowledge as well as avoiding political sensitivities. By and large, they believe that the show could help people to solve family issues and reduce the number of civil lawsuits. The show makers claim that most participants came to the show having nothing to lose. Rather, they feel that the show actually has the potential to promote traditional moral virtues such as respecting elders and cherishing what you have obtained.

Do television viewers perceive the show in the same way as those insiders do? Why do they watch *XLNJ*, and what gratifications do they get out of it (or not)? The answers

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[149] According to the record of programme rankings from the Entertainment Channel, the show received an average 6.03 percent rating for the past 7 years from 2008 to 2014.

[150] At the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, President Hu Jintao emphasised the aim to create a 'Socialist Harmonious Society' through egalitarian wealth distribution and concern for the country's less well-off.

to these questions will allow us to explore why a specific genre of television programme emerged at a particular time and became widely popular. The findings aim to add new insights to the existing literature addressing the Chinese television audience.

To understand what the audience gets out of the show and how it perceives potential contradictions, I conducted a survey of *XLNJ* viewers to explore, firstly, what kind of people are watching the show, i.e. the demographic characteristics of the audience; secondly, what the audience gets out of the show, i.e. their *uses and gratifications*; thirdly, what they think of the contradictions contained in the show, namely their perceptions of the potential tensions. My research in this chapter aims to investigate how the audience of the mediation show comes to terms with these possible tensions between the entertainment, social and political, and cultural aspects.

## 6.2 Demographic Features of the Sample Audience

The online survey received 201 responses in total; 185 fell within the sample criteria. Three questions were used to filter out those who had not heard of the show or had not watched it previously[151]. Among the total responses, 92 percent (185) of respondents had heard of the show and watched it at least once in the previous week. Therefore, the sample population consisted of the regular users of the mediation show.

Of the respondents, 93.5 percent (173) live in Shanghai and 88.6 percent (164) hold a Shanghai *hukou*. Accordingly, most participants of the sample population are local 'fans' of or are familiar with this mediation show. Among the sample population, approximately 28 percent are male (52) and nearly 72 percent are female participants (133). The results also show that nearly half (43.2 percent) of our respondents were aged between 25 and 34 years. Over three-quarters (76.8 percent) of respondents had received higher education in college or university; they were either currently students or had already obtained degrees. The remaining respondents (23.2 percent) had received high school education or lower.

According to the official statistics of the audience composition for Shanghai's *New Entertainment Channel* in 2010 (Wang 2011), the audience consists of 56.2 percent females, the majority (69.1 percent) is aged over 44 years, and only 15.5 percent have received

[151] Three questions were 'Have you heard of the *XLNJ* mediation show?'; 'Have you ever watched *XLNJ* before?'; and 'In the past week, how many times have you watched *XLNJ*?'.

higher education in college or university. In comparison, our sample populations are on average younger, highly educated, and mostly female adults[152]. Given that the survey was promoted via online social networking sites, this finding is unsurprising, and it is in line with the demographic characteristics of Chinese internet users (see the report by CNNIC 2014).

On average, our respondents watch television quite frequently—about 5.5 days a week[153]. In the week prior to the survey, they watched on average 4 episodes of *XLNJ*[154]. Given that the show broadcasts 6 episodes in a week from Monday through Saturday, it seems that our respondents are devoted to the show. Although more women in our sample watch, there is not a significant difference between our male and female respondents in terms of frequency of viewing[155].

Figure 6.1 shows the average days of watching *XLNJ* among three sets of groups, five age groups, four education groups, and four income groups[156], with the horizontal line indicating the means of the entire sample population. It shows that viewers aged 35 to 44 years spend more time watching the mediation show than other age groups. This result is comparable to that of market research that AC Nielsen did for the Shanghai Media Group (SMG) in 2009, indicating that 42 percent of its audience is aged 35 to 54 years (Yang 2010). By contrast, respondents aged 25 to 34 years spend the least time watching the show[157]. This can probably be explained by *XLNJ* being aired at 18:30 when most people, particularly those aged between 25 and 34 years, just finished work and are not home yet. The elder age group (55 and above) also seems to watch less of the show, which is below the average. Due to the nature of the online survey, we did not have many respondents in this age group, and therefore this result was not significant.

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[152] Mean age for our sample is: N=185, M=34.29 years, S.D.=12.486

[153] N=185, M=5.49, S.D.=1.903

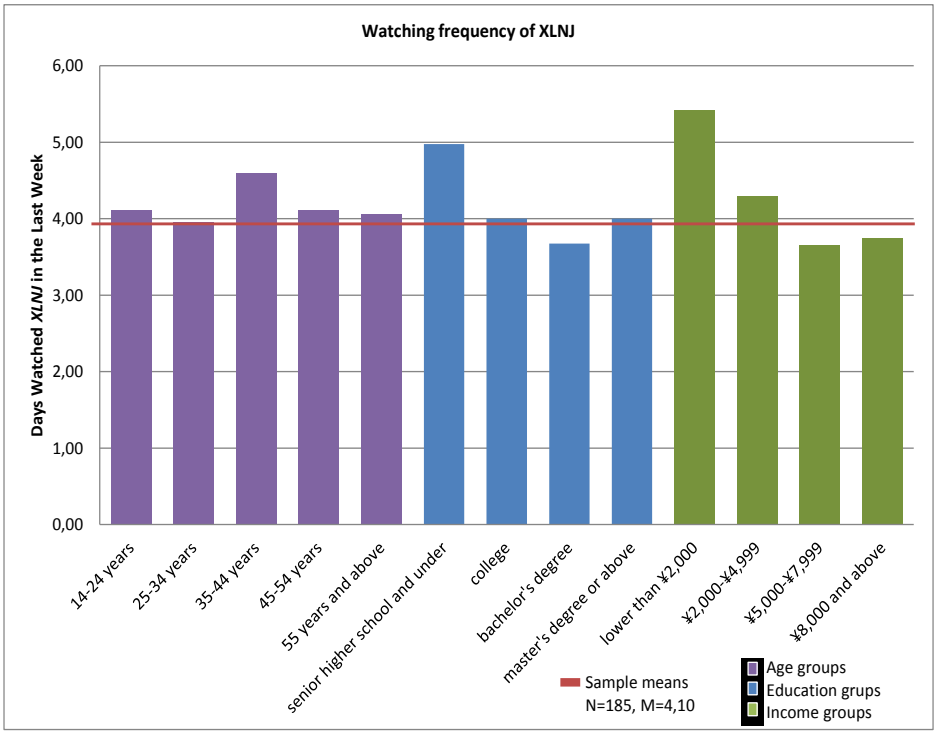
[154] N=185, M=4.1, S.D.=2.109.

[155] The result of an independent-samples t-test for Male (M= 3.67, SD= 2.42) and Female (M= 4.26, SD= 1.96) is t(78.675)= -1.571, p=0.120

[156] For comparable reason, age groups are divided according to the categorisation of that in the China TV Rating Yearbook (Wang 2011).

[157] N=80, M=3.96, S.D.=1.984

**Figure 6.1 Frequency of watching *XLNJ* between age, education, and income groups**




A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA test) has been conducted to compare the differences of watching *XLNJ* for education and income groups respectively[158]. The result for education group reveals a statistically significant difference between education groups in terms of how often they had watched the mediation show in the past week[159] (see Appendix 8). The secondary education group (senior high school and under) watched *XLNJ* more frequently than other groups. The difference is particularly significant between the secondary education (senior high school and under) and the higher education

[158] The one-way ANOVA is fairly robust to deviations from normality; it is carried out with the Tukey HSD post hoc test to determine which groups among the sample specifically have significant differences.

[159] Four education groups are: 1). Senior high school and under; 2). College; 3). Bachelor's degree (graduate); and 4). Master's degree and higher (postgraduate and higher). The result of one-way ANOVA is $F(3,181) = 3.681$, $p = 0.013$.

groups (college group and the bachelor's degree group)[160]. Respondents of secondary or lower education appeared to be more devoted to the mediation show than those with higher education, although the latter do watch. Rather, people with different education might have a different reason for watching a particular show, which I will further discuss later to understand the audience's different uses and forms of gratification.

With respect to participants' family income, 45.4 percent (84) of respondents have an average monthly income in the range of 2,000 to 4,999 RMB[161], and the range of 5,000 to 7,999 RMB came second (28.1 percent). Only 14.6 percent (27) of respondents have a higher family income, exceeding 8,000 RMB. I categorised family income into four income groups[162] and conducted a one-way ANOVA test to compare differences in terms of how often respondents watched the mediation show in a week (see Appendix 9). Statistically significant differences are found across the four income groups in terms of weekly consumption of *XLNJ*[163]. Respondents belonging to the lowest income groups (lower than 2,000 RMB) watch significantly more of the mediation show than those in the two higher income groups (5,000-7,999 RMB, and 8,000 RMB and above)[164]. This matches the national statistics that approximately 63 percent of the audience of the Entertainment Channel have a monthly income lower than 2,000 RMB (Wang 2011). This finding also matches the programme makers' expectation of their audience, i.e. those belonging to the mid-low income group in Shanghai[165]. It is noteworthy that a large number of those seeking dispute solutions on television come from the mid-low income group of around 2,000 RMB per month per head[166]. They are regarded as a low-income group in Shanghai, as they just meet the minimum wage standard of 1,450 RMB per

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[160] A Tukey post hoc test reveals that the days spent on watching *XLNJ* is statistically significantly lower for respondents who received college education (4±2.1 days, p=0.9) and university education (3.68±2 days, p=0.007) compared with the secondary education group (4.98±2 days).

[161] Current exchange rate, 1 Chinese Yuan (RMB) = 0.12 Euro = 0.16 US dollar.

[162] 1). lower than 2,000 RMB; 2). 2,000-4,999 RMB; 3). 5,000-7,999 RMB; 4). 8,000 RMB and above.

[163] F (3, 171)= 2.923, p= 0.035.

[164] Tukey HSD post hoc result reveals that watching frequency of *XLNJ* for the income group 5,000-7,999 RMB is 3.65±2 days, p=0.044; and for income group 8,000 RMB and above it is 3.74±2 days, p=0.097, which are both significantly lower than the lower income group (lower than 2,000 RMB), which has a viewing frequency of 5.42±2.4 days.

[165] According to the interview with the programme makers.

[166] Interviewees #1 and 7.

month[167]. It seems that disputants on TV and the devoted audience are mostly from the same low-income group, probably because the latter find the content closer to their own life.

In summary, the frequent viewers of the mediation show in our sample have the demographic characteristics that are in line with the national statistics: 1) aged over 35 years, 2) lower education, and 3) lower income[168]. In fact, these demographic features of the sample are, to a large extent, similar to the programme makers' conception of their audience. That is to say, in the producers' opinion, older television viewers with lower education and/or lower income have a greater rapport with the programme because they recognise that they could encounter similar situations.

## 6.3 What Makes People Watch the Mediation Show?

Having an indication of who watches *XLNJ*, I now turn to the question 'why'? I adopt the *uses and gratifications* approach (U&G) to study why people choose to watch the mediation show and what they get out of it. The U&G approach (Katz 1959) addresses the issues of media selection and consumption, and its origins lie in the search for answers of questions: why do people use media, and what do people do with media contents?

The U&G approach suggests that individuals play an active role in selecting media to gratify their specific needs or motives (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973). U&G has been employed in investigating a wide range of media including newspapers, radio, and television, as well as new media. Early researchers have concluded a variety of *uses and gratifications* that the audience is often attempting to satisfy, such as surveillance, information seeking, entertainment, personal identity, passing time, social utility, diversion, or companionship (Dimmick, Sikand, and Patterson 1994, Lin 1998, Rubin 1983, McQuail, Blumler, and Brown 1972, Livingstone 1998). These social and psychological needs are described as cognitive and emotional in nature (Maslow 1970).

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[167] The minimum wage standard is set by the government. See http://www.gov.cn/fwxx/sh/2012-03/26/content_2100302.htm [Last access: 18th August 2015]

[168] According to the official statistics reported in the 2012 China Radio and TV Yearbook (Wang 2013): 53.2 percent if the audience is aged over 35 years, 64 percent have lower education (middle school and primary school), and 71 percent have monthly family income higher than 3,000 yuan.

Drawing on previous studies on reality television using the U&G framework (Reiss and Wiltz 2004, Rubin 1983, Papacharissi and Mendelson 2007), I adopt the following sorts of possible gratifications related to why people watch the mediation show: (1) *Passing time*; (2) *Social utility*; (3) *Entertainment*; (4) *Information seeking*; and (5) *Perceived closeness*. According to early studies, many people turn on television just for background as they do something else such as housework, and some people watch television only because they have nothing better to do to *pass time* (Scannell 1996). *Social utility* refers to the television audience watching television since their family members do, as well, or to discuss issues on TV with others. Considering that the mediation show is broadcast through an entertainment channel, I also include *Entertainment,* to determine whether the audience watches the show for pleasure, relaxation, or emotional release. Both programme makers and television mediators hold the opinion that the show provides dispute solutions for the audience. Therefore, I also include *Information Seeking* as a gratification to investigate if the audience finds the show helpful as an educational tool in providing them with information that facilitates their understanding of the world or allows them to learn how others solve their problems. Last but not least, the mediation show is broadcast in the Shanghai local dialect, which is likely to bring the local audience closer to the show. Language, as part of the culture that helps to construct one's identity (Joseph 2004), allows the audience to develop a more intimate relationship with the mediated. For this reason, the fifth gratification, *Perceived closeness*, is used here as a variant of *Personal identity* (see Chapter Three).

I examined the audience's *uses and gratifications* as dependent variables, and these 5 items of gratifications were measured by statements[169], using a Likert scale. Participants were asked to indicate on a 6-point scale up to what point they agree with the reason given for watching the mediation show[170]. People of different demographic backgrounds

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[169] These five statements are (1) I watch *XLNJ* because I find this programme interesting, it can make me laugh; (2) I watch *XLNJ* because my family members or other people I know watch it, so I can discuss it with them; (3) I watch *XLNJ* because it's a habit, and I have no other things to do; (4) I watch *XLNJ* because it shows how other people deal with the same problems I have, so I could learn about what could happen to me.; (5) I watch *XLNJ* because people speak Shanghainese on the show, which is close to real life and makes me feel very close to those people on television.

[170] 1=Not like me at all; 2=Not like me; 3=A little like me; 4=Somewhat like me; 5= Like me; 6= Very much like me.

might have different motives to watch the mediation show, as the programme makers assume; I therefore use the age, education, frequency, and income as explaining variables and hypothesise:[171]

**H1:** Age, income, education, and TV consumption have an effect on the audience's *uses and gratifications* of the mediation show.

I expect that TV consumption would be positively correlated with all five *uses and gratifications* because an early study has shown significant association between time spent on the media and motives for use (Papacharissi and Mendelson 2007). In particular, I expect that viewers from lower income and education groups are more likely to learn from watching television programmes as programme makers have the aim to educate people from the 'grass-roots' level.

The results in Table 6.1 show that the respondents exhibit great fondness for the dialect of Shanghainese used in the show, which seems to generate a cordial feeling for them (M=4.60, SD=1.380)[172]. With participants speaking this dialect on the show, it creates a daily-life-like scene that brings the audience closer to those on the show. Seeking information appears to be the second main reason that motivates the audience (M=3.98, S.D.=1.502). This result matches the programme makers' expectation, as they aim to educate the audience about relevant laws and provide information helpful in solving disputes in their own lives. Companionship or social utility appears to be a third motive for the audience (M=3.39, S.D.=1.422); they watch in the hope of finding common topics to maintain relationships. In comparison, *passing time* (M=3.10, S.D.=1.434) and *entertainment* (M=2.88, SD=1.456) have lower means, which suggest that our respondents have fewer relaxation needs when watching the show. Notably, *Entertainment* gratification receives the lowest mean, which suggests that the explanation that they watch the show for fun is less likely to be a major motive. Being aired through the Entertainment Channel, the show might be less amusing than fellow programmes on the same channel. While the

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[171] Interviews with directors of the mediation show.

[172] It is noteworthy that while in general fewer respondents choose the extreme options, they did demonstrate strong attitude towards two statements. There were 22.16 percent who chose 'Not like me at all' for the statement *'I find this programme interesting, it can make me laugh';* 33.51 percent indicated that *'People speak Shanghainese in the show, which is close to real life and make me feel very close to those people on television'* was the reason that was very much like themselves.

respondents may not watch for fun and laughter, it does not necessarily mean that they do not watch it for entertainment; rather, they seem to watch it for its dramatic quality (see Chapter Seven).

**Table 6.1 Audience's U&Gs of the mediation show**

**Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix**

| Variable | Mean | S.D. | Income | Age groups | Education | Number of days watched |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) Perceived closeness | 4.60 | 1,380 | 0.026 | 0.072 | -0.155** | 0.205*** |
| (2) Information seeking | 3.98 | 1,502 | -0.050 | -0.115 | -0.251*** | 0.149** |
| (3) Social utility | 3.39 | 1,422 | 0.014 | -0.030 | -0.116 | 0.227*** |
| (4) Passing time | 3.10 | 1,434 | 0.044 | -0.145** | -0.017 | 0.120 |
| (5) Entertainment | 2.88 | 1,456 | 0.025 | -0.041 | -0.003 | 0.238*** |

N=185; * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

1=Not like me at all; 2=Not like me; 3=A little like me; 4=Somewhat like me; 5= Like me; 6= Very much like me.

Audiences' *uses and gratifications* of the mediation show have a significant association with weekly television consumption[173]. There are significant positive correlations between weekly television consumption and all U&G items except *Passing Time*, indicating that respondents who spend more time watching television are more likely to watch *XLNJ* to obtain gratifications than those who watch less television. It might be that people do not like to admit that they watch the mediation show in order to pass time, regardless of how many days they watch TV in a week.

Among our respondents, it seems those with lower education background are more likely to identify with the language used by the show. This finding, to some extent, verified early lingual scholars' studies that people of the lower socio-economic class hold a more positive attitude with respect to dialect (Cheshire et al. 1989), though the correlation between income and users' needs was not found[174]. Moreover, as mentioned,

[173] Measured by how many days that one watched television in the past week.

[174] An ANOVA test also finds no differences between income groups in terms of participants' use of *XLNJ* for entertainment, social utility, passing time, seeking information, and perceived closeness. Entertainment: F(3, 171)=0.186, p=0.906; Social Utility: F(3,171)=0.396, p=0.756 ; Passing time: F(3,171)=0.060, p=0.981; Information seeking: F(3,171)=0.681, p=0.565; and Perceived closeness F(3,171)=0.305, p=0.821; see Appendix 11.

disputants on the show usually come from a lower educational background, so the language and slang they use are likely to create a stronger empathic bond with audiences who have a similar educational background.

As I expected, there is a significant negative correlation between education and the use of *XLNJ* for information seeking. This suggests that respondents with lower education are more likely to learn from the mediation show. This finding also is in line with the programme makers' aim for the show to educate the masses about legal knowledge. Particularly, significant differences are found between the four education groups in seeking information usage[175]. Respondents in the secondary education group (senior higher school and under) are more likely to gather information when watching the mediation show (M=4.56, S.D.=1.22) than other groups. This result suggests that when the respondents' education level increases, they are less likely to seek information from *XLNJ*. People with higher education might be able to obtain information from other sources, while those of lower education tend to mainly rely on the mass media as their information source, as found in other studies (Carpentier, Schrøder, and Hallett 2013, Muusses et al. 2012, Zhao 2009).

There is a weak but significant negative linear relationship between Age and *Passing Time*, suggesting that with the increase of age, the degree of watching *XLNJ* for *Passing Time* goes in an opposite direction. The ANOVA tests[176] show a significant difference between the age group 14-24 years (M=3.64, S.D.=1.428) and 25-34 years (M=2.89, S.D.=1.232), revealing that respondents in the younger age group are more likely to watch *XLNJ*, possibly because they have nothing else to do compared with other age groups.

So, **H1** is partly rejected, with only education and watching frequency of television affecting the audience's *uses and gratifications*. As the result suggests, the use of dialect plays a major role in attracting the audience and providing them with a feeling of perceived closeness. In fact, programmes in dialect have long been welcomed in many cities[177], especially among female audiences aged between 45 and 64 years with secondary

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175 ANOVA test F(3, 181)= 5.086, p= 0.002; see Appendix 12.

176 F(4, 180)= 2.902, p= 0.023; see Appendix 13.

177 Such as News Talk by A Liu Tou (a liu tou shuo xinwen) in Hangzhou, Let Me Tell You (jiang bo nong ting) in Zhoushan, Desire Magic Cube (yuwang mofang) in Wuhan, and Chengdu Love Story (Chengdu qingshi) in Chengdu.

education (senior higher school and under) (Chen 2009a). This can be explained by people having a language affiliation with the dialects and thus identifying more with it as a core marker of their identity (Block 2009) than the official unifying language of Mandarin. Introducing dialect in television programmes seems to enable the audience—especially those elderly who have adopted the dialect more thoroughly—to associate with the community where they grew up.

Motivation for information seeking turns out to be second strongest reason that the audience watched *XLNJ*, especially for those that do not have higher education. Although entertainment was found to be associated with reality television by early researchers (see, for example, Papacharissi and Mendelson 2007, Reiss and Wiltz 2004), as for gratifications of this study, social utility rather than entertainment has been identified as a stronger motivation. Apparently, our respondents tend to claim that they get something out of watching the show rather than watching it for fun or simply to killing time. But they are certainly attracted to the show that they watch, on average, four episodes out of six per week. If it is only partly fun for them, then how do they perceive the show?

## 6.4 Perceptions of *XLNJ*

From a psychological perspective, perception is to understand the surrounding environment by organising, identifying, and interpreting sensory information (Gibson 2002, Schacter et al. 2011). The viewer's understanding and interpretation of the visual and oral information in a television show constitute their perception of it. In other words, what the audience sees and hears on TV conveys information to them, which has an effect on their understanding and opinions of the content. For example, when people watch *XLNJ*, they watch the disputants' and mediators' behaviour and facial expressions and listen to their conversations, from which they learn what happened between two disputants and why they arguing. The audience then processes such information according to their personal knowledge or experiences. In that case, their perceptions and opinions towards the same dispute may vary from one person to another. My survey research is aimed to explore their different perceptions of the same mediation show in terms of its entertaining, social and political, as well as cultural aspects.

The production of the *XLNJ* show (see Chapter Five) integrates elements of entertainment to attract audiences, claiming to promote social harmony by latently

reducing the number of lawsuits, and while the show conveys moral norms, it also refreshes traditional views on the culture of losing face. In this research, the audience's perception of the mediation show refers to their understanding and interpretation of these three aspects, i.e. entertaining elements, social implications, and cultural values; these are important dependent variables for my research.

### 6.4.1 Audience's Perception of Entertainised Mediation

As indicated in Chapter Five, one major goal of *XLNJ* is to attract more viewers and increase its market share. Due to the show's nature as an entertainment programme, various entertainment elements have been blended into the mediation show that sometimes make it look dramatic and sensational. Such rendering of entertainment does help in attracting viewers, but it may also trigger suspicion about its authenticity, as it seems too exaggerated to be true.

The previous U&G section indicated that our respondents do not perceive *XLNJ* as an amusing programme. Is that because mediation is not fun, or do they find that mediation per se is not something to make fun of? I use two statements to measure the audience's perception of the entertainment appeal of the show. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agree or not with the statements that 'Civil mediation is serious and should not be made into entertainment on TV' – *entertainment perception 1* (EP1)[178] – and 'I will not choose mediation on TV as a solution for my own issues, but it is fun to watch other's disputes' – *entertainment perception 2* (EP2)[179]. Answers to these two questions should reveal whether the audience sees a difference between serious mediation and entertainised television, or if they can reconcile such a contradiction. In the following analysis, I will investigate the factors that are associated with these two *entertainment perceptions*[180].

Whether television viewers find the mediation show entertaining is likely to be associated with patterns of their television consumption, which includes the frequency of

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[178] EP1 is coded as: 1=strongly agree; 2=somewhat agree; 3=somewhat disagree; 4=strongly disagree

[179] EP2 is recoded as: 1=strongly disagree; 2=somewhat disagree; 3=somewhat agree; 4=strongly agree. So that it goes same direction as EP1, that lower value refers to lower *entertainment perception*, and higher value refers to higher perception of entertainment.

[180] Since there is low consistency between EP1 and EP2 (Cronbach's Alpha for these two items is -0.255), I will not establish a scale for these two items. Instead, they will be treated separately in this analysis.

watching the show and watching habits. *Watching frequency of XLNJ* refers to how often the respondent watched *XLNJ* in the past week[181]. *Watching habits* refers to seven types of television programmes that one frequently watches[182]. Based on the seven types, I established an index for *watching habit of entertainment (WH_E)* consisting of fashion programmes, reality entertainment, and television drama series[183], and *watching habit of information programmes* (*WH_I)* on the basis of news, legal programmes, and service-type programmes[184]. These two indices are used to measure the audience's preference for entertainment programmes and information programmes.

In addition to watching frequency of XLNJ and watching habits, also included in this analysis as control variables are, age, education[185], family income[186], CCP membership[187], experience of mediation[188], and satisfaction with society[189]. According to the programme makers, most people who turn to the show for dispute resolution live at the 'grass-roots' level and have low income. So, I included respondents' family income as one control variable to determine whether the audience's financial situation has a relationship with their perception. Moreover, considering that the mediation show is

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[181] Respondents are asked 'How many days in the past week that you have watched *XLNJ*?'

[182] Participants were asked how often they watch the following TV genres: (1) Fashion / Music / Celebrities; (2) Sports games; (3) Reality television talent shows; (4) News / Information programmes; (5) Programme features helping ordinary people to solve their issues in life; (6) Crime / Law programmes; (7) TV Drama / Soap Opera. These items were coded as 1=never, 2= rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=very often, 5=always.

[183] Cronbach's Alpha for the three TV genres is 0.493.

WH_E= fashion * reality * series. Scale ranges from 1 to 125; lower values indicate lower frequencies in watching entertainment programmes, and higher values indicate higher preferences for entertainment programmes.

[184] Cronbach's Alpha for the three television genres is 0.545.

WH_I= news * legal * help. Scale ranges from 1 to 125; lower values indicate lower frequencies in watching information programmes, while higher values indicate higher preferences for information programmes.

[185] 1= Senior high school and under; 2= College; 3= Bachelor's degree; 4= Master's degree and higher.

[186] 1= lower than 2,000 RMB; 2= 2,000-4,999 RMB; 3= 5,000-7,999 RMB; 4= 8,000 RMB and above.

[187] CCP membership is recoded as a dummy variable, 1= CCP and Youth League member, and 0= non-party member.

[188] Respondents are asked if they have experienced civil mediation before. This is recoded as dummy variable, 0= no; 1= yes.

[189] Satisfaction with society is established based on three questions asking respondents to what extent they are satisfied with the society in terms of the economic development (satisfaction1), public security (satisfaction2), and environmental protection (satisfaction3). Answers are coded as: 1=not satisfied at all; 2=not so satisfied; 3=fairly satisfied; 4=very satisfied. *Satisfaction with society*= satisfaction 1* satisfaction 2* satisfaction 3 (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.740 ). The scale ranges from 1 to 64, while lower values representing lower social satisfaction and higher values representing higher satisfaction with society.

aimed at solving family disputes, those who have experienced civil mediation previously may have different perceptions from others who have no such experience. People who are dissatisfied with society might be more suspicious about television programmes, so I assume that those who are more satisfied with society find the show more entertaining. Furthermore, members of China's Communist Party or Youth League were expected to have a relatively high political awareness, so I included this control variable to examine whether they have different perceptions from other non-Party members.

My hypotheses related to the audience's *entertainment perception* were:

**H2:** People who watch more mediation shows in a week are more likely to perceive these shows as entertaining than those who watch them less frequently, keeping all other variables controlled.

**H3:** People who often watch entertainment programmes are more likely to perceive the mediation show as entertaining than those who habitually watch information programmes, keeping all other variables controlled.

On average, our respondents show a tendency to disagree (M=2.79, S.D.=0.870) with EP1, suggesting that they do not perceive any problem in turning civil mediation into entertainment on TV. Also, on average, they tend to agree with EP2 (M=2.91, S.D.=0.749), not taking mediation on TV as an option for themselves, but perceiving it as fun to watch. The means of both statements suggest that the audience considers that the show is somewhat entertaining; after all, it is broadcasted on an entertainment channel.

Two ordinal logistic regressions have been carried out to investigate the relation between respondents' perception of entertainment and their viewing habits as well as other control variables[190]. Table 6.2 shows the parameter estimates for the *entertainment perception*. The model[191] for EP1 confirms that there are systematic effects in the *entertainment perception* related to our independent variables, meaning that there are

[190] Since both dependent variables *entertainment perception* 1 and 2 are ordinal variables with four categories, ordinal logit regression is adopted to further analyse the relationship between our independent variables and the audience's *entertainment perception*. In order to make the coefficient more comparable between independent variables, I recode all of the independent variables such that the values run from 0 to 1.

[191] The model for EP1 is a significant improvement over the baseline or intercept-only model ($p=0.08<0.1$). The goodness-of-fit statistics suggest that the model fit the data well ($p=0.252$). The Nagelkerke $R^2$ indicates that the model can account for 8.6 percent of the variance in tier of entry. And the test of parallel lines does not reject the null hypothesis of the Proportional Odds assumption ($p=0.732$).

correlations between them. In relation to *watching frequency of XLNJ*, the coefficient is 0.742, which is fairly significant[192] and related to responses on the dependent variable EP1. Odds Ratio is calculated to indicate the odds of indicating disagreement with the statement for *entertainment perception 1*. For example, the odds for *watching frequency of XLNJ* is exp.(0.742)=2.10, indicating that the odds of showing disagreement with the *entertainment perception 1* increase by 2.1 for each unit increase in *watching frequency of XLNJ*. Consequently, the parameter estimate indicates that respondents who watch *XLNJ* more frequently are more likely to disagree that the civil mediation is serious and should not be made into entertainment; in other words, they are likely to judge that making mediation into entertainment is acceptable. The result also indicates a close-to-significant relationship between *watching habit for entertainment*[193] and EP1, while no significant relationship is found for *watching habit for information*[194].

Shown in the same table is the model for EP2[195], which reveals an unexpected significant but obvious relationship[196] between respondents' watching habit of information programmes and their agreement with EP2. Those who are least interested in information programmes are 2.27 times (i.e. 1/0.44) more likely to watch the mediation show for fun than those with a highest preference for information programmes[197]. This model finds weak relations between watching frequency, preference for entertainment, and EP2. These findings for EP1 and EP2 are converse to the expectation in our hypothesis. Therefore, **H2** is partially rejected, while **H3** is rejected. According to our results, respondents' *entertainment perceptions* are not influenced by the frequency with which they watch the mediation show, nor by their preferences for entertainment programmes.

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[192] $p=0.086 < 0.1$

[193] P=0.169. The odds ratio is exp.(-1.081) = 0.34, indicating that the odds of disagreeing with the *entertainment perception statement 1* decrease by 0.34 for each unit increase in *watching habits for entertainment*.

[194] The parameter for *watching habits entertainment* is -1.081 at a loosely significant level, and the coefficient for *watching habits information* is -0.339.

[195] The model fitting information for EP2 is p=0.393. The goodness-of-fit statistics suggest that the model fit the data well (p=0.422). The Nagelkerke $R^2$ indicates that the model can account for 5.4 percent of the variance in tier of entry. And the test of parallel lines does not reject the null hypothesis of the Proportional Odds assumption (p=0.326).

[196] P=0.190

[197] Exp. (-0.829)=0.44

However, the two models reveal significant effects in respondents' perception of entertainment in relation to previous personal experience of mediation and age. Respondents with no personal experience of civil mediation are significantly more likely to find mediation turning into entertainment acceptable, compared with those who have experienced mediation before[198], after other independent variables are controlled. Indeed, personal experience could have an effect on individuals' opinions about the mediation show. It is understandable that for those who have gone through it, civil mediation is not a funny issue to be made into entertainment. Though not significant, respondents with no Party membership appear to be less likely to perceive the entertainment value of the mediation show[199]; this factor does not seem to affect one's attitude in finding the mediation show entertaining.

Respondents' age and education have relatively strong relationships with *entertainment perception 2* when other variables are controlled. Examining the parameter estimates, we can see that older respondents or those with higher education are more likely to agree that TV mediation might not be an ideal option for them, but that it is fun to watch. *Age* has a mildly significant effect[200]; when compared with younger respondents, older people are much more likely to find mediation on TV entertaining. This result does not necessarily mean that younger respondents do not watch the mediation show for fun. Respondents with higher education were more likely to agree that TV mediation was fun to watch rather than a source of information for their own issues, though the relation is hardly significant. Also, the result suggests that those who are more satisfied with society are potentially more likely to be agreeable if mediation is made into entertainment[201], while respondents who have lower income are somewhat less likely to use it as an option to employ in their own lives, but more likely to watch the show for fun[202].

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198 B=0.915, p=0.026. The odds ratio exp.(0.915)=2.50 reveals that those with no mediation experience are 2.5 times more likely to find that it is not an issue to make mediation into television entertainment than those who had previous mediation experience.

199 Estimates for both EP1 and EP2 are negative: B for Ep1 is -0.511 and for Ep2 is -0.121.

200 P=0.079

201 P=0.252

202 P=0.118

**Table 6.2 Entertainment Perception of *XLNJ* (Ordinal Logistic Regression)**

| | Entertainment perception 1- Civil mediation is serious and should not be made into entertainment on TV | | | Entertainment perception 2-I will not choose mediation on TV as a solution for my own issues, but it is fun to watch others' disputes | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variables | Estimate | S.E. | Odds Ratio | Estimate | S.E. | Odds Ratio |
| Watching frequency XLNJ | 0.742* | 0.433 | 2.10 | -0.094 | 0.449 | 0.91 |
| Watching habit entertainment | -1.081 | 0.786 | 0.34 | 0.046 | 0.803 | 1.05 |
| Watching habit information | -0.339 | 0.596 | 0.71 | -0.829 | 0.633 | 0.44 |
| Education | -0.142 | 0.935 | 0.87 | 1.338 | 0.985 | 3.81 |
| Age | 0.455 | 1.027 | 1.58 | 1.815* | 1.034 | 6.14 |
| Non Party member vs. CPC party or Youth League member | -0.511 | 0.312 | 0.60 | -0.121 | 0.331 | 0.89 |
| No mediation experience vs. Had mediation experience before | 0.915** | 0.412 | 2.50 | 0.437 | 0.420 | 1.55 |
| Satisfaction with society | 1.063 | 0.928 | 2.90 | - | - | - |
| Family Income | - | - | - | -1.102 | -1.102 | 0.33 |
| Threshold (strongly agree statement) | -1.794 | 1.181 | - | - | - | - |
| Threshold (somewhat agree statement) | 0.260 | 1.164 | - | 2.763** | 1.174 | - |
| Threshold (somewhat disagree with statement) | 2.207* | 1.093 | - | 0.159 | 1.151 | - |
| Threshold (strongly disagree with statement) | - | - | - | -2.086* | 1.203 | - |

Link function: Logit.
* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, ***p<0.01;
**Note:**
**EP1:** N=172; SE=Standard Error. Pseudo R-square: Cox and Snell= 0.078; Nagelkerke = 0.086; McFadden = 0.033
**EP2:** N=173; Pseudo R-square: Cox and Snell= 0.048; Nagelkerke = 0.054; McFadden = 0.022

Taken the above results for *entertainment perception* together, it suggests that how people become familiar with civil mediation may influence their perception of its seriousness. Those watching *XLNJ* on a frequent basis are devoted viewers who enjoy the show and obtain their knowledge about mediation through watching the show. So for them, regardless of whether they see mediation as serious or not, making it into television entertainment is not an issue. This also confirms the finding from the previous *uses and gratifications* result that heavy television / programme viewers appear to enjoy the show more than others. However, the personal experience of civil mediation is very likely to

make one consider mediation a serious affair. Having participated in real mediation, these people know clearly what it is like, so they are less likely to find it fun to watch others' disputes on television. For them, turning civil mediation into entertainment seems inappropriate.

In addition, respondents' personal background such as age and education have an effect on their perception of the mediation show in terms of its entertainment appeal. Combined with the finding in the previous section, this suggests that while those having lower education tend to seek information from the show, the audience members with higher education are more likely to find it fun to watch the mediation show. Particularly, elderly people seem to enjoy the mediation show more than the young; however, this does not mean that the young people do not watch the show for fun. It seems possible that older people do not see mediation on TV as a solution to their issues.

### 6.4.2 Political Implications

Apart from the endorsement from the SJB, the popularity of *XLNJ* among the audience in the Shanghai urban and surrounding areas also won it praise from SMG and government officers. The special seminars (see Chapter Five) held in 2008 and 2010 give the programme makers confidence that the mediation show wields positive influence in building a harmonious society and heightening public ethical awareness. In fact, playing to the government's call for a 'harmonious society' is an important aim of the show as seen by programme producer and directors. Whether the audience members perceive the political aim of the show in the same way as seen by its makers is a question worthy of pursuit.

To measure the audience's *political perception* (PP) of the mediation show, I used three statements with which respondents could agree or not. Two statements concern the public's opinions on the social and political implication of the mediation programme: 'I think this programme helps resolve some people's family disputes and helps create a harmonious society' (PP1) and 'I think such mediation shows help to reduce the number of lawsuits' (PP2). The third statement, 'I don't think those disputes in the programme are common in real life; so this show fails to raise attention to social issues' (PP3), is intended to measure the audiences' opinions towards disputes in the mediation show in terms of

their representativeness of social issues. Based on the three statements, an index for *political perception*[203] is created to measure how respondents interpret the social and political implications of the show, of which the higher value indicates the higher *political perception*. That is, the mediation show could help to solve family conflicts, reduce the number of lawsuits and promote harmonious society, and raise social attention of common issues. A lower value refers to lower *political perception* of the mediation show.

With respect to independent variables, one's political attitude may have a relationship with the perception of the mediation show in terms of the social and political implications. Taking into account the gap between political interest and efficacy indicated in early research (Bromley, Curtice, and Seyd 2004), I use both *political interest*[204] and *political efficacy* as measures for respondents' political attitude. Political efficacy consists of external efficacy, referring to the belief that one is effective when participating in politics, and internal efficacy, indicating the belief that one can understand politics and therefore participate in politics. *External political efficacy* is measured with two statements in the survey[205] and *internal political efficacy* is measured with three[206]. Respondents being more politically efficacious might have higher political awareness, and accordingly better perception of the political implications of mediation. In addition, I include *satisfaction with society* to measure to what extent people are satisfied with their life and the country, because personal satisfaction with society could influence one's political attitude (Clarke, Dutt, and Kornberg 1993). Respondents are asked about their satisfaction with economic development, public safety, and the social welfare situation in China.

Other control variables comprise a series of demographics, such as *gender, education, CCP membership,* and *experience of mediation,* because they might influence one's *political*

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[203] PP1 and PP2 are coded as 1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, and 4=strongly agree, and PP3 is coded oppositely, so that all three statements proceed in the same direction. The index for *political perception* is then created: PP=PP1*PP2*PP3; the scale ranges from 1 to 64. Lower values represent lower perception of political implications, while higher values represent higher *political perceptions*.

[204] Respondents are asked 'How often you discuss news/political affairs with others'. 1= never; 2= occasionally; 3= sometimes; 4= often; 96= don't know

[205] 'People like me don't have any say about what the government does' and 'Government officials don't care what people like me think'.

[206] 'Politics is so complicated that people like me can't really understand what's going on', 'I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics', and 'I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country'.

*perception* of the mediation show. In the survey, respondents are also asked about their interests in seeing other sorts of disputes on the *XLNJ* mediation show, including neighbour disputes (1); family disputes over property distribution (2); and disputes between citizens and the government (3)[207]. Among these three sorts of disputes, 1 and 3 are rarely seen on the mediation show, as programme makers view them as beyond the scope of family issues, which are likely to be intervened in by government institutions. Dispute 2 issues of family property distribution were very once common on *XLNJ*—although the producer and the core production team intended to cover a wider range of topics, disputes over houses remain the most frequently occurring topic (see Chapter Five).

As mentioned above, people with high political efficacy have more faith and trust in government and in their own ability to understand politics. In this sense, they might be more likely to perceive the mediation show in terms of its political function of promoting social harmony. It has been argued that citizens' satisfaction towards society reflects their overall trust in the government and regime (Dalton 1996). In the same vein, those who are more satisfied with society might be more likely to perceive the *political perception* of the show. My hypotheses for the *political perception* are:

**H4:** People with higher (external and internal) political efficacy are more likely to perceive the political implications of the mediation show than those with lower political efficacy, keeping all other variables controlled.

**H5:** Satisfaction with society is expected to be positively correlated with the audience's *political perception* of the mediation show, keeping all other variables controlled.

The results show that respondents generally hold a positive attitude towards the social and political influence of the mediation television show[208]. In general, they agree that issues addressed in the mediation show are common in society, and that the programme could help to solve people's family issues and reduce the number of lawsuits.

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[207]Respondents are asked if they are not interested at all, not so interested, fairly interested, or very interested to see the mediation for these disputes on the show. 1= Not interested at all; 2= Not so interested; 3= Fairly interested; 4= Very interested; 96= don't know.

[208] The reliability test shows that these two questions were internally consistent — the Cronbach's Alpha is 0.801 for the first two questions (PP1 and PP2), and after recoding the value of the third question (PP3), the Cronbach's Alpha for the three questions measuring audiences' attitude is 0.621.

A multiple regression[209] has been run to explore the relationship between independent variables and respondents' *political perception*s. As Table 6.3 shows, only internal political efficacy (confidence that they can make a difference), rather than external political efficacy (perceptions of governmental and institutional responsiveness to citizens' needs and demands), has a significant negative relationship with respondents' perceptions of the political implications of *XLNJ*. Although internal and external political efficacy are frequently discussed as overall concepts, their measure falls into two unique dimensions that interact differently with other variables (Balch 1974). In this study, the results indicate that an increase in one's internal political efficacy (IPE) will cause a significant decrease (-14.734) in the perception of the political implications contained in the mediation show. In other words, the more self-confidence one has in one's ability to understand and participate in politics, the less likely one would perceive the show as representing common social issues and as being helpful in reducing the number of lawsuits.

Respondents' political interest seems to have a slightly significant correlation with their *political perception* (p=0.123). The relationship between respondents' *political perception* and their political efficacy is puzzling, being associated only with lower internal political efficacy. Contrary to my expectation, the relationship between individuals' political efficacy in fact leans towards a negative direction. The coefficient for IPE (-14.734) suggests that people who have less confidence in their abilities to influence politics are more likely to be convinced by the mediation show in terms of its representativeness of social issues and its effect in promoting an accessible solution to disputes other than going to court. The coefficient for EPE also presents a negative relation, though it is not significant. We therefore cannot accept **H4** because of the contrary finding. Respondents' faith in government responding to their concern seems neither to encourage nor discourage their perception of the show's social and political implications. Compared with their external political efficacy, our respondents' *political perception* of the show appears to be more associated with their confidence in understanding or participating in politics. Linking the discussion with focus group participants (see Chapter Seven), it seems that since the audience has lower confidence in themselves to make change to political affairs,

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[209] In order to compare coefficients across the independent variables and control variables, all of the independent variables were recoded such that values run from 0 to 1.

they are likely to tend to have more faith in the media's effect in bringing attention and providing solutions to social issues.

**Table 6.3 Political perception of *XLNJ* (Multiple regression analysis)**

| | Dependent Variable Political Perception | |
|---|---|---|
| Independent Variables | Coefficient | S.E. |
| External political efficacy | - 0.492 | -5,189 |
| Internal political efficacy | -14.734* | -7,848 |
| Political interests | 7.908 | -5,088 |
| Satisfaction with society | 18.856** | -9,320 |
| Interest in Family disputes regarding property distribution and inheritence | 19.232*** | -7,163 |
| Interest in watching disputes between neighbours | 4.723 | -6,564 |
| Interest in watching disputes between citizens and government | - 8.106 | -6,196 |
| Control Variables | | |
| Gender | - 6.704** | -3,173 |
| Education | -21.753** | -8,490 |
| CPC membership | 2.238 | -2,864 |
| Mediation experience | - 0.120 | -3,577 |
| Constant | 33.986*** | -8,751 |
| N | 130 | |
| R-Squared | 0.225 | |

**Note:**

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, ***p<0.01

Another independent variable, *Satisfaction with society*, has a significantly positive relationship with respondents' *political perception* ($p<0.05$). Seemingly, the more satisfied one is with society, the more likely one would perceive the mediation show to help solve family conflicts, reduce the number of lawsuits, promote a harmonious society, and raise social attention to common issues. Therefore, **H5** is accepted. The increase of one's satisfaction with society suggests that one feels that less in society needs to be improved and/or that one believes much has been done to improve society.

As shown in Table 6.3, there is a significant relation between respondents' *political perception* and their interest in family disputes over housing issues[210]. Respondents' interests in family disputes increased by one unit would cause a significant increase (19.232) in their agreement that the show is helpful in solving issues and promoting social harmony. But the audience's interests in either neighbour disputes or conflicts between citizens and government have no influence in their *political perception*. Unlike what the producer perceived, it seems that our respondents in general remain more interested in family disputes[211]. This finding is consistent with what is revealed in Chapter Five, that property-related disputes remain the most frequently occurring issues that enjoy a high audience rating.

A correlation test (Table 6.4) reveals significant correlation between the respondents' weekly consumption of *XLNJ* and their interests in the three kinds of disputes. Seemingly, the respondents' interests in disputes motivate their consumption of *XLNJ*. Equally, it can be argued that more consumption of *XLNJ* would not cause the audience to tire of arguments over house property. On the contrary, frequent watching of *XLNJ* seems to sustain the audience's interest in different kinds of disputes. As discussed in Chapter Five, there is a political tension in the show between reaching a harmonious society and showing people in conflict. The respondents' attitude towards this tension is somewhat reflected by the positive and significant correlation between their high interests and high frequency in watching disputes and their *political perception*. It seems that people might more likely be convinced by the show rather than finding it contentious if they are frequent and/or interested viewers. A finding is also revealed in the focus group discussion where non-frequent or non-interested viewers are more likely to doubt how efficient the mediation show could be in promoting harmony by providing solutions to individual cases (see Chapter Seven).

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[210] B=19.232, $p<0.01$

[211] M=3.10, S.D.= 0.3672

**Table 6.4 Correlations between Political Perception, Weekly Consumption of *XLNJ*, and Interests in Other Disputes**

| **Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Independent Variable | Mean | S.D. | Political Perception | Watching Frequency of XLNJ |
| Interests in family dispute over house | 3.1 | 0.672 | 0.324*** | 0.263*** |
| Interests in disputes between citizens and government | 2.94 | 0.786 | 0.102 | 0.270*** |
| Interests in neighbour dispute | 2.79 | 0.742 | 0.226*** | 0.245*** |

N=183; * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

PP=PP1*PP2*PP3 (range from 1 to 64)

Satisfaction with society=satisfy1 * satisfy2 * satisfy3 (range from 1 to 64)

Interests in disputes: 1=Not interested at all, 2=Not so interested, 3=Fairly interested, 4=Very interested

Gender[212] and education also have significant relationships with the audience's *political perception* ($p<0.05$). This result suggests that among our sample population, female respondents are more likely to perceive political implications of the mediation show when compared with male respondents. An increase in respondents' education level leads to a decrease in their *political perception* of the mediation show. It seems that those with lower education are more likely to agree that the mediation show contributes to reducing the number of lawsuits and promoting a harmonious society. It is possible that respondents with lower education are more easily convinced by *XLNJ*.

Three statements used to measure *political perception* reflect the programme makers' and mediators' opinions on the educational and social harmony aim of the show. In general, those who are more satisfied with society and have less self-confidence in understanding or participating are more likely to be convinced by the show and perceive it as helpful in promoting social harmony. The result of a correlation test (Appendix 10) suggests that satisfaction with society has a significant negative association with political

[212] The coding: 0=female, 1= male

interest[213], meaning that those who are more satisfied with society are likely to be less interested in politics. Moreover, the results suggest that women with lower education and higher interest in family disputes on house issues are more likely to perceive the aim established by programme makers. These characteristics to a large extent match the profile of the frequent viewers of the show. Indeed, it does not seem to be a difficult issue for the show to convey its aim to its devoted audience. Does this also mean that, given the issue of potentially losing face, the devoted viewers do regard televised mediation as a wise choice?

### 6.4.3 Audience's Perception of the Cultural Aspect

In Chinese tradition, it is a shame to reveal one's family disputes in public. So how do people perceive this issue as it relates to the programme? Two statements were used to examine how audiences think of this potential cultural contradiction in the show. Respondents were asked whether they agree or not with these statements: 'Mediation shows like this promote moral virtues such as respecting and supporting the elderly; being loyal to marriage and family; understanding each other with tolerance' (*cultural perception 1*); and 'I think it is losing face to tell your family dispute on TV, which brings damage to your family reputation' (*cultural perception 2*). The two perceptions are analysed separately by using ordinal logit regression[214].

The cultural aspects of *XLNJ* are linked to respondents' inherent attitudes towards China's traditional culture. Shi (2015) uses *orientation toward authority* and *definition of self-interest* as independent cultural variables to study their impacts on people's political behaviour. According to Shi's definition, these two terms refer to norms regulating the proper relationship between individuals and authority (the government and other kinds of authority) and norms telling individuals what the proper unit of analysis in their interest calculation is. He distinguishes the Western model and the Eastern, Confucius model for these two cultural norms (see Figure 6.2).

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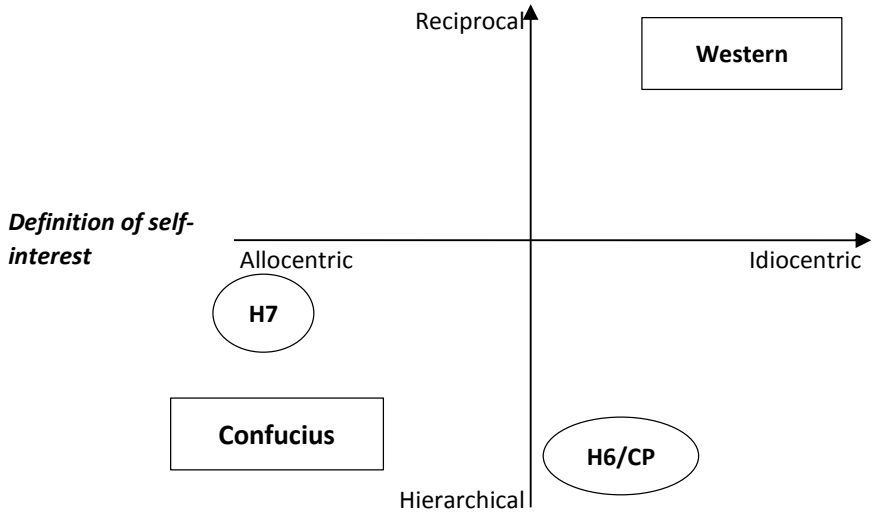
[213] $r = -0.239$, $p<0.01$

[214] Cronbach's Alpha *cultural perception 1* and *cultural perception 2* is only 0.216, and thus treated separately.

**Figure 6.2 Western and Confucian models of cultural attitude**




In the Confucian model of society, the key social relationships are: 1) Father and son, 2) Brother and brother; 3) Husband and wife; 4) Neighbour and neighbour; and 5) Ruler and subject (Legge 1992). These pairs of relations were all hierarchical in nature in the Confucius model of society: parents were superior to children, older brothers to younger ones, husbands to wives, etc. Moreover, in the Confucian model, people tend incorporate their self-interests into that of collective groups so that the boundary between personal goals and the goals of the collective are blurred, and individuals' self-interests were constrained and would not jeopardise the collective interests (Shi 2015, 48).

According to Shi (2015), the difference between what he calls a hierarchical and a reciprocal *orientation towards authority* lies in their respective means to control the behaviour of those in power. People holding a hierarchical orientation tend to expect the government to take care of their interests, as parents do for their children. They tend to rely on internal and external policing systems associated with constraining power, while those holding a reciprocal orientation tend to rely primarily on institutions to control those in power (Shi 2015, 54).

Regarding the *definition of self-interest*, people with an allocentric (community-minded) *definition of self-interest* voluntarily take the interests of the group they are affiliated with into consideration in their interest calculations. By contrast, those with an idiocentric

definition have no obligation to consider the attitudes of others towards them, and they legitimise 'the pursuit of personal goals separate from those of any group, even when personal goals are in conflict with those of groups to which the individual belongs' (Shi 2015, 48).

I integrate Shi's measurements of *orientations toward authority* and *definition of self-interest* in my survey as independent variables to examine whether they are correlated with the audience's *cultural perception* of the mediation show. In the survey, three questions tap into individuals' orientations towards authority, investigating people's perception of their relationship with the state[215]. The scale of *orientation towards authority* (OTA) is based on the three statements[216], with the lowest value meaning that the respondent holds a hierarchical OTA, while the highest value refers to a reciprocal OTA. Similarly, three questions are used to measure the respondents' *definition of self-interest*, indicating entering into conflict with others to promote their own interests[217]. A scale for *definition of self-interest* (DSI) is based on the abovementioned statements[218]. The lowest value indicates an Allocentric DSI, and the highest value suggests an Idiocentric DSI.

In addition to the two independent variables OTA and DSI, I also include the following control variables: age, gender, education, family income, watching frequency of *XLNJ*, satisfaction with society, CCP membership, and experience of mediation. Traditionally, the Chinese are regarded to be under Confucian influence, holding a hierarchical OTA and an allocentric DSI. They observe the hierarchical rules in social relations, and tend to voluntarily redefine and constrain their pursuit of self-interests so as to maintain harmony in society. Therefore, I propose the following hypotheses:

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[215] Participants are presented three statements: (1) 'If any conflict occurs, we should ask senior people to uphold justice'; (2) 'Even if parents' demands are unreasonable, children should still do what they ask'; and (3) 'When a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law come into conflict, even if the mother-in-law is in the wrong, the husband should still persuade his wife to obey his mother'.

[216] Orientations Toward Authority (OTA) = OTA1*OTA2*OTA3. The Cronbach's Alpha for these three DSI questions was 0.766. Scale range: 1~64, hierarchical OTA ~~ reciprocal OTA.
1=strongly agree; 2=somewhat agree; 3=somewhat disagree; 4=strongly disagree.

[217] Respondents are asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with the following three statements: 1. 'A person should not insist on his own opinion if people around him disagree'; 2. 'When various interest groups operate and compete in a locale, they will damage everyone's interests'; and 3. 'The state is like a big machine and the individual a small cog, and thus should have no independent status'.

[218] Definition of self-interest = DSI1*DSI2*DSI3. The Cronbach's Alpha for these three DSI questions was 0.523. Scale range: 1~64, allocentric DSI ~~ idiocentric DSI.

**H6:** People holding a more hierarchical *orientation towards authority* are more likely to perceive the cultural contradictions of the mediation show than those holding a reciprocal *orientation towards authority*, keeping all other variables controlled.

**H7:** People with an allocentric *definition of self-interest* are more likely to perceive the cultural elements of the mediation show than those with idiocentric *definition of self-interest*, keeping all other variables controlled.

Ordinal logit regressions are used to examine the relationships between respondents' OTA, DSI, and their cultural perceptions[219]; the results are shown in Table 6.5. Let us take a look at the result for OTA in both the models of *cultural perception 1* (CP1)[220] and *cultural perception 2* (CP2)[221]. As the result indicates, CP1 has a negative relationship with respondents' *Orientations towards authority,* while the relationship respondents' OTA and CP2 is a positive one. It seems that respondents holding hierarchical OTA are more likely to agree that the mediation show could help to promote moral virtues, but are less likely to perceive participants as losing face when discussing family disputes on television. However, neither of the results is significant. We therefore reject **H6**, because the respondents' cultural attitudes have little effect on their opinions towards the mediation show. This means that respondents' perception of the mediation show in terms of its cultural virtues will be barely influenced by respondents' *orientation towards authority*.

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219 All of the independent variables are recoded, such that values run from 0 to 1.

220 The model fitting information for CP1 is p=0.115. The goodness-of-fit statistics suggest that the model fits the data well (p=0.995). The Nagelkerke $R^2$ indicates that the model can account for 11.3 percent of the variance in tier of entry. And the test of parallel lines does not reject the null hypothesis of the Proportional Odds assumption (p=0.313).

221 In order to have a more significant model for CP2, I exclude some independent variables. Therefore, independent variables included for CP2 are not the same as those for CP1. The model fitting information for CP2 is p=0.188. The goodness-of-fit statistics suggest that the model fits the data well (p=0.548). The Nagelkerke $R^2$ indicates that the model can account for 6.8 percent of the variance in tier of entry. And the test of parallel lines does not reject the null hypothesis of the Proportional Odds assumption (p=0.464).

**Table 6.5 Cultural Perception of *XLNJ* (Ordinal Logistic Regression)**

| | Cultural Perception 1 - Mediation shows promote traditional virtues. | | | Cultural Perception 2 - It is losing face to discuss family dispute on TV, which brings damage to family reputation | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variables | Estimate | S.E. | Odds Ratio | Estimate | S.E. | Odds Ratio |
| Orientations toward authority | -0.902 | 0.911 | 0.41 | 0.704 | 0.806 | 2.02 |
| Definition of self-interest | 0.136 | 0.902 | 1.15 | -1.581** | 0.805 | 0.21 |
| Education | 1,440 | 1,108 | 4.22 | 1.494 | 1.061 | 4.45 |
| Non Party member vs. CPC party or Youth League member | 0.685* | 0.373 | 1.98 | -0.245 | 0.332 | 0.78 |
| No mediation experience vs. Had mediation experience before | 0.406 | 0.486 | 1.50 | -0.026 | 0.473 | 0.97 |
| Watching frequency of XLNJ | -0.757 | 0.513 | 0.47 | - | - | - |
| Age | -0.288 | 1,277 | 0.75 | - | - | - |
| Female V.S. Male respondents | -0.437 | 0.392 | 0.65 | - | - | - |
| Satisfaction with Society | 0.907 | 1,079 | 2.48 | - | - | - |
| Family Income | - | - | - | -1.081 | 0.730 | 0.34 |
| Threshold (strongly disagree with statement) | -4.347** | 1,703 | - | -1.714* | 0.994 | - |
| Threshold (somewhat disagree with statement) | -1,386 | 1,402 | - | 0.564 | 0.981 | - |
| Threshold (somewhat agree with statement) | 1,289 | 1,401 | - | 2.559** | 1.009 | - |
| Threshold (strongly agree with statement) | - | - | - | - | - | - |

Link function: Logit.

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, ***p<0.01;

**Note:**

**CP1:** N=139; Pseudo R-square:Cox and Snell= 0.097; Nagelkerke = 0.113; McFadden = 0.052

**CP2:** N=136; Pseudo R-square:Cox and Snell= 0.062; Nagelkerke = 0.068; McFadden = 0.026

Taking a look at the results of the *definition of self-interest* in both models (see Table 6.5), we find no significant relation between CP1 and respondents' DSI. As for CP2, there is a noticeably significant relation between respondents' *definition of self-interest* and *cultural perception 2* (p=0.05), which means that when respondents' *definition of self-interest* decreases, i.e. moving from idiocentric towards allocentric, they are more likely to agree with the statement for c*ultural perception* 2. In other words, those who take the interests of the group they are affiliated with into consideration in their interest calculations, are more

likely to agree that it is losing face to discuss one's disputes on television. This finding matches our expectation that people under a Confucian model are more likely to perceive cultural elements contained in the mediation show. Accordingly, **H7** can be partly accepted.

Moreover, the results indicate that regularly watching *XLNJ* has a loosely significant relation with respondents' *cultural perception* 1[222], which suggests that the frequent watching of *XLNJ* would not necessarily make respondents appreciate the virtues promoted in the show. People who are less familiar with the show might, however, perceive the show as one promoting traditional virtues.

Of the independent variables, respondents' education seems to have a certain effect on one's *cultural perception* of the show. The parameter estimate for education is the highest (1.440) in the CP1 model and the second highest (1.494) in the CP2 model, meaning that when the respondent's education level increases, they are more likely to perceive the mediation show as promoting traditional cultural virtues though they are also likely to find it embarrassing to discuss family disputes in public. Both relationships are still loosely significant[223].

Among our sample respondents, CCP_membership has a significant effect on audience's *cultural perception* of *XLNJ*. This result shows that the odds for non-party members to perceive the moral virtues embedded in the show are nearly two times higher than for members of the CCP or Youth League. In other words, Party members appear to be less likely to regard the show as advocating virtues in society.

Respondents' family income, as shown in the results for CP2, has a close-to-significant relationship with their opinions on face-losing issues[224]. It seems that among the respondents, those with higher income are less likely to find reputation issues in the mediation show problematic. When all other variables are held constant, the increase in family income tends to lead to a decrease in agreement with the statement that it is losing face to discuss family issues on television and that it brings damage to family reputation. In other words, respondents in our sample who have lower family income are more likely to judge revealing family disputes in public as discreditable. Programme

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222 B=-0.757, p=0.140

223 CP1: P=0.194; CP2: P=0.159

224 p=0.138

makers held that people from the 'grass-roots' level have nothing to lose, suggesting that they care less about their reputation in disputes. However, this seems to be untrue according to our result: those having lower income in fact do care about their family reputation.

In general, it appears to be different from our expectation that respondents' *cultural perception* is not significantly related to their cultural attitude. One result, however, does match our assumption that respondents holding allocentric DSI are likely to agree with the statement of CP2. Respondents having an allocentric DSI would give priority to the interests of the group, and it seems reasonable to expect that they would value the family reputation to a large degree.

## 6.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have discussed the profile of our frequent viewers of the mediation show, what motivates them to watch, and how they 'negotiate' with different layers and potential contradictions the programme has. In this study, the profile of the mediation show viewers quite matches the programme makers' assumption about their target audience (see Chapter Five). The frequent audience of the show turns out to be, to a large extent, middle-aged viewers coming from the 'grass-roots' level, with relatively low education and low income, who turn to the show for dispute resolution. The audience seem to be attracted to the show as they share an identification with the participants, which also explains their appreciation of the dialect used in the show. Language, as an important part of culture, constructs one's personal identity (see, for example, Cavalli-Sforza 2001 and Joseph 2004). Next to the need for personal identity, learning and seeking information appear to be important reasons for the audience to watch the show. It seems that the programme makers' aim to educate the masses about civil mediation and legal knowledge is matched by the viewers' gratifications.

In addition to the audiences' uses of and gratifications from the show, the survey data also provide us with some insight into the audience's perception of possible contentious issues, in three aspects. First of all, there seems to be a contradiction between the audience's entertainment needs and their *entertainment perception* of the show. On the one hand, they do not publicly admit that they watch the show with the purpose to amuse themselves. On the other, however, frequent viewers seem agreeable when serious mediation is made into entertainment and also find it fun to watch other people's issues

on the show. This seemingly contradictory finding suggests that people might not have specific entertainment needs when they tune into the mediation show, but they do enjoy and amuse themselves when watching the show. This kind of obtained enjoyment might be more unconscious. This form of motivation can only become clear when you approach the viewers personally, which I will discuss in the next chapter that discusses the focus group.

It seems that people seek not only information but also entertainment when they watch the mediation show. Possibly the hybrid nature of reality television makes it difficult for the audience to see the difference between entertainment and information, as commonly assumed (Hill 2005, 2). Given the positive connection between entertainment, social utility, and weekly consumption of television watching, it is arguable that respondents are attracted to the show for information seeking, while its entertainised content may well sustain their interest in continuing to watch. This also suggests that television not only provides information or entertainment, but can also enhance interpersonal bonding.

Secondly, with respect to the political aspect, it seems that the show successfully portrays a harmonious image among the audience, especially those socially contented female respondents with lower education and low confidence in their ability to make a change in society. These perceptions of the show are largely in line with the programme makers' political goal to promote social harmony. In comparison, while this group of respondents is more easily convinced by the show, audiences with higher education report the opposite perception: they are likely to find the show fun rather than promoting social harmony. Notably, the frequent viewers of the show are those in the first group, which suggests that the mediation show could easily promote its harmony-creating role among the audience, and subsequently win the praise of the authorities. Contrary to the producer's claim that the audience gets fed up with recurring housing issues (see Chapter Five), this topic still seems to be interesting to our respondents—partly because, as will be discussed in the next chapter, these issues are close to people's ordinary lives. The result from the survey study suggests that respondents, especially those with lower levels of internal political efficacy, can be convinced that the mediation show promotes social harmony although it presents conflicts on the screen. Perhaps, since they lack confidence in themselves to participate in politics, they are likely to place faith in publicised

mediation to make a change in society. I will further explore this question in the next chapter.

While the audience seems to perceive the show in the same way as programme makers do in terms of its political aspect, they do not necessarily hold the same value with respect to the cultural aspect. For example, although programme makers do not regard it as a problem, it does not necessarily mean that the reputation issue is fine with the audience, as well. In particular, those who are community-minded are more likely to be concerned about the consequence of making the private public. For them, the individual's interest could never be separated from groups such as the family. It seems conflicting, however, that the audience sees the show as influential in promoting traditional virtue by televised mediation despite the concern for the potential negative consequences it would bring to the family.

The findings from this chapter help to set the scene for my subsequent focus group research. According to the results discussed above, respondents' perceptions of the show may not necessarily be consistent with their viewing preferences and traditional cultural values. Admittedly, the result of the online survey should not be generalised due to the sample size and selection bias. But we may expect that the positive or negative relations between variables to a large extent will remain regardless of the sample size, which can still provide us with insights about audience perception. The way in which audiences perceive the reality of mediation shows is complex. It is therefore valuable to explore in further qualitative research whether the audience, as it seems, can actually live with contradictions.

# Chapter Seven

# FOCUS GROUP

## 7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has portrayed the profile of my sample population: the majority of the *Xin Lao NiangJiu* (新老娘舅, *XLNJ*) show viewers appear to be middle-aged (over 35 years) in the economic classes with relatively little education. The cultural closeness of identity through language employed on this programme appears to be one main reason that attracts the audience. Respondents also watch the show particularly to learn or to spend time with their families, but less for relaxation purposes such as passing time or entertainment. Seemingly, television consumption would motivate respondents to watch a specific programme. The results suggest that people might enjoy the show without initially seeking entertainment. The results also indicate that the show might be better able to achieve its social and political aims among female respondents of lower education. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Confucian culture seems to have little influence on respondents' judgements of reputation-based issues on the show. Having gained an idea about who is watching the mediation show and why they watch, the next step of the audience study is to further explore what audiences get out of the show and how they deal with the contradictions suggested in previous chapters.

Focus groups are particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences because they not only allow us to examine what people think, but how they think and why they think that way (Merton, Fisk, and Kendall 1956). It also has the advantage that it can encourage participation from people reluctant to be interviewed on their own or who feel that they have nothing to say (Kitzinger 1995). Participants of the focus group consist of both frequent viewers and not-so-frequent viewers of the Shanghai

mediation show[225]. In total, four sessions have been carried out (see Chapter Four). Twenty-four respondents (12 males and 12 females, age 20-65 years; all from Shanghai) participated in four mixed-gender focus groups: one higher education and one lower education group for frequent and non-frequent viewers, respectively. Each group consisted of six participants, allowing me to control the discussion and encourage everyone to talk. As the show broadcasts six days a week, people who had watched twice or more in a week were considered frequent viewers. Similarly, non-frequent viewers were those who had watched the show on average once a week or less during the past six months. People who had not watched the mediation show before were excluded because they knew too little to participate in the focus group discussion.

This composition is planned for two reasons: firstly, the survey results made clear that heavy viewers and non-frequent viewers differed in their views. Secondly, gender and educational 'separation' were applied to make respondents feel comfortable in the discussion. It is likely that people of a lower education level might be less encouraged to talk when they are put in the same group with those of higher educational level, and the same could be true for gender categorisation. In the survey, the average age of respondents is 34 years (min.=16, max.=73, M=34.29, S.D.=12.486), and average educational level is between college and bachelor's degree. Therefore, college/university education is used as the dividing point between the higher and the lower education groups, i.e. the higher education group includes university students and those with college/bachelor's or higher degree, while the lower education group includes participants with high school education or lower.

In this chapter, I will firstly discuss how respondents say they make use of and obtain gratifications from the show. Then, I will analyse audiences' perceptions of the show in three steps. Firstly, why do they watch? One contradiction raised in the survey analysis regarded the entertainment aspect: people enjoy watching the dispute mediation on TV, but they did not think that *XLNJ* is a show that they watch for fun. So, what, for them, is the entertaining appeal of the show? Secondly, the social and political aspects are considered. While the audiences acquire legal and mediation knowledge from the show,

[225] Originally, I categorised the audience into two groups: fans and non-fans. Since the categorisation was difficult to define and not feasible when recruiting the participants, I now categorise the audience into frequent viewers vs. non-frequent viewers.

do they consider this as a goal established by the programme makers, and how do they deal (if they do) with the tension between the entertainment and the social harmony aims? Thirdly, the cultural aspect is assessed. While the audiences did not find discussing private disputes on TV a losing-face issue, why are they themselves unwilling to go on TV with their own disputes?

## 7.2 Understanding Viewers' Uses and Gratifications

In this section, I will discuss the frequent and non-frequent viewers' motives and uses of the mediation show, which allows us to understand what use audiences make of the show as well as their likes and dislikes[226].

In the previously conducted online survey, I used statements to measure five gratifications, i.e. (1) perceived closeness; (2) information seeking; (3) social utility; (4) passing time; and (5) entertainment[227]. The survey result shows that most respondents are attracted to the show because of the dialect used being familiar to them, while at the same time, they also seek information. Respondents hardly feel or admit that they watch *XLNJ* for fun or for killing time. During the focus groups, participants were asked why they choose to watch *XLNJ* over the programmes aired at the same prime time slot. The participants' explanations to some extent reflect their personal uses of the show, which can deepen our understanding of the survey findings.

### *7.2.1 Dialect and Cultural Identity*

As the survey results suggest, perceived closeness through language is the major reason why respondents are fond of watching *XLNJ* (M=4.60, S.D.=1.380). Focus group participants also note that the local dialect spoken on the show has enhanced its competitiveness for attracting viewers. Indeed, some viewers have a preference for

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[226] Appendix 14 provides a description of participants.

[227] Five statements were (1) I watch *XLNJ* because I find this programme interesting, it can make me laugh;(2) I watch *XLNJ* because my family member or other people I know watch it, so I can discuss it with them; (3) I watch *XLNJ* because it's a habit, and I have no other things to do; (4) I watch *XLNJ* because it shows how other people deal with the same problems I have; so I could learn about what could happen to me.; (5) I watch *XLNJ* because people speak Shanghainese in the show, which is close to real life and make me feel very close to those people on television.
Participants were asked to indicate whether they find these statements were Very much like me; like me; somewhat like me; a little like me; not like me; and not like me at all.

programmes spoken in the same dialect that viewers happen to speak. In addition to *XLNJ*, other programmes that these frequent viewers often watch include *Happy Three Brothers (Kuaile Sanxiongdi)*, *A Qing's Story Time (A Qing Jiang Gushi)*, and *The Bai Wanqing Talk Show (Yihu Baiying),* which are all in local dialects. Apparently, most of our viewers prefer programmes using a familiar dialect. Given the fact that few programmes are produced in Shanghainese, shows like *XLNJ* then become popular especially for viewers who sympathise with a sense of group identity. The same language makes the show more accessible for local audiences as it provides them with a sense of cultural closeness, i.e., a sense of 'us'.

Some frequent viewers seem to tune in to *XLNJ* for a language environment that is familiar to their native tongue. Many frequent viewers appreciate this feature of the show and regard the dialect as an important part of their identity. Indeed, dialect or, sometimes, slang, is a strong marker of cultural identity (Cavalli-Sforza 2001). The use of dialect certainly brings the disputants closer to the audience, making them just like 'those ordinary people that you meet every day in your neighbourhood, in the market, or on the street'[228]. This comment is echoed by several other participants. A man in his fifties[229] reports that *XLNJ* 'minimises the distance between the audience and the television station, by speaking the same dialect and involving the spectators in the mediation process'. It seems that by 'closer', the participants refer to the familiar feeling generated by the shared cultural background and the same regional identity. Born in Shanghai, the ability to master the local language appears to be an important part for their Shanghainese identity, even though they do not necessarily speak it every day. Using the same dialect to a certain extent makes our participants feel that they belong to the same (regional) community as the disputants and audience commentators on the show.

Mastering the dialect therefore becomes an important passage to integrate into the society. Perhaps that explains why one participant[230] uses the show as 'educational material' to familiarise her child with the language environment. Although not intended for language teaching, this suggests another function of programmes in dialect. This is somewhat evident from the programmes that participants preferred. Despite the variety

[228] Participant #4
[229] Participant #7
[230] Participant #12

of shows they frequently watch, they do not mention mediation programmes broadcast on other provincial channels. Most TV programmes are broadcast in Mandarin Chinese due to the SARFT's restraining the amount of dialect programmes in order to promote the official Mandarin language[231].

The dialect element seems to be an important factor for attracting audiences. Most programmes and teleplays broadcast in Shanghai are in Mandarin Chinese, which makes the few programmes that use Shanghainese particularly popular among local audiences. Not only elderly viewers, but also some young participants agree that mediation carried out in Shanghainese makes these shows more interesting to watch. Speaking the same language attracts the audience and draws the programme closer to them, which also allows the audience to feel empathy for the disputants. It seems the same dialect used in the programme helps to construct these participants' identity. It seems that 'the construction of identity … involves establishing opposites and others whose actualities are always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from us' (Said 1995, 332).

Not everyone appreciates the feature of local dialect, however; one man's meat is another man's poison. Some non-frequent viewers assert that the use of local dialect has made the show even more vulgar. One of them states in a critical manner that television in Shanghai 'has been decreasing in both refinement and artistic aspects. Programmes such as *XLNJ*, *Bai Wanqing Talk Show*, *A Qing's Story Time*, are neither knowledgeable nor thoughtful…'[232]. To him, the show is vulgar regardless of its claim of promoting civil mediation. Another participant presumes that the limited choice is the crux of the matter, which explains why 'the few programmes speaking Shanghainese become particularly popular'[233]. These participants appear to be more in line with the governments' Promoting Mandarin Campaign. It seems that they consider slang as inappropriate language for public media to employ.

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[231] See, for example, an article on the restraining of dialect programmes: SARFT requires producers to promote Mandarin, while people request protection of specific dialects (Huashang 2014).

[232] Participant #13

[233] Participant #14

### 7.2.2 *Learning from Others' Stories*

Learning experiences and seeking information through *XLNJ* appears to be common among survey respondents (M=3.98, S.D.=1.502). Likewise, the majority of frequent-viewer focus group participants give credit to the show for its educational undercurrent. Participants find that they are sometimes enlightened by certain cases in the show. A retired middle school teacher who is now a contented grandma[234] believes the show is particularly helpful to people of her age, as she says:

> ´They (the mediators) have done a good job when disputes [are] related to inheritance distribution, prenuptial and postnuptial assets… They convinced disputants by explaining relevant rules and regulations in a simple and clear way… For example, Bai often says 'sophisticated elders should be cautious enough not to get their properties off their hands easily' (*shulian bu tuoshou,tuoshou bu shulian*) ´.

Indeed, this quote by popular mediator Bai Wanqing is well known among nearly all of the focus group participants, both frequent and non-frequent. Bai has repeated it many times, when warning the elderly to deal with their properties cautiously. This terse and forceful saying clearly allows the audience to quickly memorise it.

The participants' observations suggest that the audience's *information seeking* is not confined to legal or policy-related knowledge. Watching issues on TV can sometimes trigger self-reflection on the viewer's own life. Frequent viewers learn various lessons; for example, that 'women must be financially independent… never be greedy for your husband's family properties, otherwise you put yourself in a weak position at home'[235]. This opinion is echoed by other female participants in the same group. The show seems to make a girl in her early twenties consider issues that she might encounter in her future marriage.

Some male frequent viewers take a more broad perspective. They feel that 'the show is enlightening' and 'not only mature grown-ups, but also young people should pay more attention to this show and take warning from it', so as to 'learn how to prevent

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[234] Participant #11
[235] Participant #10

conflicts if similar situations happen to them in the future'[236]. They believe that one could benefit from real-life examples. Some participants acknowledge the show's potential edifying function, though they themselves do not obtain information from it. As one non-frequent viewer[237] said,

> 'I watch this show occasionally, and among the few issues I have watched were misunderstandings and conflicts between mothers and daughters-in-law. Disputes between in-laws seem to be an eternal topic in Chinese society. I think both the married and the unmarried shall watch this show and learn some lesson. After all, as an old saying goes: only the family members can appreciate the complexities and difficulties within the family'.

It seems that people can learn from the programme, without necessarily seeking information. In this sense, the mediation show seems unintentionally educational to them. Indeed, knowledge and learning are intrinsic to factual television (Hill 2007). On the other hand, the collaboration with the Shanghai Justice Bureau created an image of the show being intentionally educational and informative. The audience may acquire different kinds of information presented in multiple ways through formal and informal learning experiences, such as learning about world events or social issues, and about emotions or practicalities (Hill 2007, 146). When watching the show, participants can extract information that is relevant to them personally.

### *7.2.3 Viewing as Social Bonding*

The survey result indicates that watching with other family members (M=3.39, S.D. =1.422) is also a motive to watch *XLNJ*. This finding is only partially confirmed in the focus group discussions. All frequent viewers reported that they sometimes watch the show together with their family. As one male participant[238] said, he watched the show as his wife always tunes in to the Entertainment Channel during dinner, and gradually he thought that 'well, I think one can see many real-life examples from the show'.

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[236] Participants #1 and 2
[237] Participant #22
[238] Participant #9

Similarly, another male participant[239] was initially reluctant but was made to watch the show by his mother's request for companionship. Reflecting on cases he saw on TV, the participant felt that bonding can be close to learning:

> '…The most recent one I watched tells disputes between a hard-working husband of humble birth and a spoiled wife. In the past twenty some years, they were brought up in two families of different lifestyles and the different habits and customs in their lives brought about conflicts and unhappiness in their marriage. My conclusion will be, as our ancestors once said, it is important that a couple shall come from families of equal social status'.

Apparently, this participant's attitude towards the show has shifted positively when his view of life and value was affirmed. This sense of approval caused him to discuss issues with his mother. Indeed, most other frequent viewers say they discuss certain cases with family, friends, or colleagues. Some families' differences of opinion, in this way, serve as topics for personal conversations. This suggests that watching the show at times becomes a ritual that brings the family members together and thus promotes a better family relationship. For this purpose, it seems acceptable to some participants to watch the mediation show together with their family, even if it is not necessarily to their own liking.

While frequent viewers enjoy watching and discussing an episode with family, most non-frequent viewers express disapproval. Some of them complain that their parents watch the show every night, their arguments being noisy and disturbing them. One participant said[240] 'Sometimes I tell my mum that such programmes are not good for her emotional balance because they show the negative aspects of human nature, but she wouldn't listen'. Another participant encountered a similar situation, being more or less forced to watch the show from time to time. 'My parents love this show, always at dinner time. I watched several episodes with them because I have no choice… The elderly compose the majority audience of this show, I suppose.' [241] The participant's speculation

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[239] Participant #3
[240] Participant #23
[241] Participant #20

about the possible demographic feature of the show's audience is used as an argument to distinguish himself from the supposed audience orientation.

### 7.2.4 Filling the Time Gap

As discussed in Chapter Six, the audience does not have a strong intention to watch the mediation show just to pass time (M=3.10, S.D.=1.434). During the focus group discussion, a smaller minority[242] say they sometimes watch the show when they have nothing else to do. A young female participant[243] said she would watch *XLNJ* if she feels uninterested in other programmes. Another female viewer[244] usually tunes in to the show while doing her daily exercises. In her words, 'when I am doing my work-out exercises, I am in the mood for watching something, and watching *XLNJ* makes exercising less boring'. In a similar way, another male participant[245] said his mother watched the mediation show when she is doing the cleanup after dinner. Some audience members use the show as background while they do something else. They are not really watching, but would pause what they do when certain cases or arguments attract them. In addition to passing time, *XLNJ* also functions as background to some participants' monotonous household chores.

While watching television sometimes functions to fill the time gap, not many participants publicly admit this. They sometimes happen to tune into the show when watching other programmes, but they will not watch a complete episode of *XLNJ*. Tuning in is more to fill the time gap during advertisements[246]. Frequent viewers seem more likely to watch the show with a certain purpose, while the non-frequent viewers tend to watch the show almost accidentally to fill or pass time gaps.

### 7.2.5 Entertainment

The survey result suggests that respondents do not seek relaxation or amusement from the show to a significant degree (M=2.88, S.D.=1.456). Frequent viewers in the focus groups seem to have different ideas. Most frequent viewers are to a certain extent amused

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[242] Participants #6, 4, 11, and 15
[243] Participant #6
[244] Participant #4
[245] Participant #15
[246] Participants #15, 20, and 24

or attracted by 'dramatic', 'moving', or 'sensational' plots of various dispute stories. In fact, some participants[247] make no secret of their enjoyment of the show by frankly admitting that they sometimes have a good laugh. For them, 'arguments over trivial matters' between couples and some issues that are 'not common in life' seem like 'dark comedy' or are 'more interesting than soap operas'[248] . One of them provided an example when recalling a recent case:

> '…a remarried couple, when their child was born, the new dad's ex-wife paid a visit to the new-born baby with her current husband whose ex also came along. (It is) like a complicated chain, which was so hilarious.'[249]

Such extraordinary and bewildering situations the participants find amusing. It seems that surprise and inconceivability give rise to curiosity, which in turn provides a certain contentment of prying into others' secrets. Situations that elicit laughter vary according to individuals' preferences. It could be the plot of a dispute story, a specific personality of some disputant, or sometimes, it could be some sharp commentary provided by the presenter or the mediator. For instance, another frequent viewer finds commentaries from the mediator and the audience sometimes incisive and equally, if not more, witty, making him smile. As he said,

> '…(the mediator) Huang Feijue[250] is funny and will sometimes become very emotional. You can tell from his face whether he is about to lose temper and scold someone. There was one time he even snapped at the co-presenter Haiyan[251]. I think it is interesting…but I like Pei Zhen[252] particularly, I think maybe because of his occupation (as a lawyer), he often gives clear and concise advice, sometimes with a sense of humour.' [253]

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[247] Participant #1, 6, and 9

[248] Participants #1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 12

[249] Participant #6

[250] Huang Feijue, co-founder of the *Shanghai Times* (*shenjiang fuwudaobao*), often appears on the *XLNJ* show as a mediator.

[251] Haiyan is one of the two presenters of the *XLNJ* show.

[252] Pei Zhen, lawyer and also is one deputy to the National People's Congress (NPC).

[253] Participant #9

Compared with the findings from the survey chapter, it seems that participants might not necessarily have entertainment in mind when they tune into the show, but are being entertained while watching. The fun they get out of watching might function as a reason to sustain their interest in watching. This enjoyment of entertainment, however, only becomes evident when you probe people. They tend not to admit when asked, but this admission comes out naturally during discussions of other matters.

Not everyone would watch *XLNJ* with the intention to seek entertainment. The majority of frequent-viewer participants, however, admit that they have some fun when watching the mediation show, whether deliberately or inadvertently. Most frequent viewers also watch similar programmes, such as *Bang Nvlang* and the *Jiafang Yifang Show*[254]. They claim to have a preference for programmes showing real people's lives, which they think is close to ordinary citizens' real issues. But it is also possible that such preference has its root in the natural curiosity of humans. As revealed in early audience research (Nabi et al. 2003, 2006), the feeling one gets from peeping into others' lives is associated with the enjoyment of reality TV. Also, in this study, participants seem to enjoy watching what happens in others' families, as an experience of entertainment.

On the other hand, most of the non-frequent viewers believe that the show downplays the seriousness of real mediation and makes use of it so as to attract (and entertain) the audience. With respect to them, the show is like other dialect programmes such as *Baijiaxing* and *Yihubaiying* on the same channel that present non-representative stories without any artistic refinement. Comparing with frequent viewers, non-frequent viewers appear to be more suspicious about the authenticity of the show. As indicated in many audience studies, reality TV viewers do not naively believe the authenticity claim made by the industry (Cui 2005, Hill 2005, Lynch 2005, Macartney 2005, Marquand 2005, Yardley 2005, Zhou 2005). Our respondents do not accept at face value the implicit claim that the shows are real. Some viewers are aware that the cases mediated are carefully selected, and others often suspect that the stories presented on the show are staged or manipulated by producers.

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[254] The *Jiafang Yifang Show* (literal meaning is Party A vs. Party B) is a newly emerged mediation show broadcasted through Shanghai satellite channel Dragon TV. Similar to *XLNJ*, the show claims to help in solving disputes between people by providing legal as well as psychological advice.

Moreover, some participants feel that the participants' behaviour on the mediation show is affected by the presence of the cameras. They suspect that some cases might not come to an agreement had they been mediated off-screen. In this sense, this particular medium of television to some extent exerts certain pressure on the disputing parties and accordingly helps to bring about the agreement.

## 7.3 Tensions and Contradictions

### *7.3.1 Perceiving Entertainment*

In this section, I will analyse our discussants' views on the entertaining appeal of the mediation show. This analysis is based on the participants' discussion of the following question during the focus group: *What makes you choose to watch this mediation show over other programmes?* Subsequent questions regarding the entertainment appeal are also assessed. The analysis in this section also tries to understand one contradiction raised in the survey analysis, that people enjoy watching the dispute mediation on TV who nevertheless claim that the show is not fun to them. So, in the audience's opinion, what is the entertaining appeal of the show? And how do they align the seriousness of conflict with the fun of watching it on TV?

Generally, frequent viewers watch the show because they find it interesting. The word 'interesting' seems to contain various meanings to participants. Some of them are curious to know what happened between disputants, which they sometimes find quite dramatic, even more than soap operas. Some participants say that they are interested to see what the mediator would say, particularly their reaction to sometimes seemingly absurd issues; these mediators include Bai Wanqing, Pei Zhen, and Wan Feng, who are known for being tough and impartial.

In two frequent viewers groups, some participants enjoy watching *XLNJ* because dispute stories in the show are often told in an attracting way with twists and turns, and at times are very dramatic. Some of them feel that some cases are like 'a live version of *Gushihui (*collection of stories*)*[255], it is much more interesting than watching TV plays' [256],

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[255] *Gushihui*, literally *collection of stories,* is a widely circulated magazine in the People's Republic of China, published by Shanghai Literature & Art Press (*shanghai wenyi chubanshe*). It includes short stories of different types,

and sometimes the storyline could be 'comparable to that of mystery films' or even 'more impressive' than some popular movies[257].

The show is regarded as dramatic, and almost theatrical, partly because stories are edited in a way to create a cliff-hanging effect and each story is given a sensational or thrilling title to generate the audience's interests. A heavy viewer[258] notices that episode titles sometimes fail to represent the actual issue, and she feels that exaggerated titles are used only to attract eyeballs. In that sense, entertainment does not only or does not necessarily refer to fun and laughter, but also to drama and dramatisation. Programme producers occasionally adopt editing techniques to enhance emotional conflicts between disputants. Nevertheless, they realise that some dispute stories per se are unbelievably dramatic. For example, many frequent viewers[259] were shocked after learning about a case of a 19-year-old mother[260] as they had never heard about such things before and such a situation is beyond their imagination, and quite dramatic. One participant thinks that such a story 'could be made into a fairly good play'[261]. It suggests that such unusual issues in the show sometimes might serve as good conversation topics.

Another example that deeply impressed the participants is the one titled *Papa Has A New Home, Mama Has A New Home, Where Is My Home?*[262] This episode told a pitiful story about a 10-year-old abandoned boy whose parents remarried respectively and left him to stay with his grandfather, who suffered a myocardial infarct. Most frequent-viewer participants had watched this episode, and were profoundly touched by the boy's sufferings. They express their pity for the boy and accused his parents of being selfish, irresponsible, and heartless. This story reminds many participants of a TV play, Unpaid

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such as love stories, overseas stories, humour stories, and so on. Usually, stories were written in a way that tend to generate a vivid and sensational effect for their readers.

256 Participant #2

257 Participants #3 and #5

258 Participant #10

259 Participants #4, 5, 8, 9, 11, and 12

260 On Aug. 19 & 20, 2013, XLNJ broadcasted two episodes titled 19-year-old young mother was forced to work at night club by her birth mother (19sui xiaomama jingbeishengmu tuiruhuokeng?).

261 Participant #12

262 Papa has a new home, Mama has a new home, where is my home? (babayigejia, mamayigejia, hechushiwojia?)

Debts *(Nie Zhai*[263]*)*, depicting the story of five children who went to Shanghai from Xishuangbanna, Yunnan to look for their *zhiqing*[264] parents who were sent down there. The once-popular theme song for the series moved a wide audience with the heart-touching lyrics: 'Father has got a home, Mother has got a home, I have been left on my own, feeling I am a redundant one'.

Participant #9 empathised greatly with the boy, saying that,

> '(this episode) make me recall the song for *Nie Zhai*. Though I am now nearly 30 years old, the thought of that lyric still make me feel sad. I quite understand this boy's feeling as I once went through a similar situation. Marriage requires thorough consideration, and divorce needs even more mature deliberation. The divorce set you free. But even if you can hardly tolerate your imperfect marriage, how can you expect a child to suffer a broken family… '

Other participants in the same group have sympathy with this point of view and they are indignant about such irresponsible parents. Indeed, the show employs an anything-goes format including both common and uncommon issues in society.

Focus group participants are sometimes moved by others' pitiful experiences. Some participants[265], however, also frankly admit that they watch the show for relaxation and entertainment. Sometimes, the show could cheer them up. 'There are all kinds of arguments and extremely strange people (on that show), you will suddenly realise how beautiful your life is, and instantly you get back into a good mood'[266]. The audience

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[263] *Nie Zhai*, first aired in 1994, is a TV series based on the novel of the same name, by author Ye Xin. The novel portrays five *zhiqing* families, among which four were marriages between Shanghai *zhiqing* and local people, and one was between *zhiqing*. In order to return to Shanghai, they divorced their local spouses and left their children. The *zhiqing* couple gave their son away to a local family. Those *zhiqing* all began a new life after they returned to the city. About ten years later, the children from these five broken families came from Yunnan to Shanghai to look for their parents. They were not looking for a better life in the city, but for an answer from their parents about why they disliked them. They wanted their parents to repay their emotional debts.

[264] *Zhiqing* (rusticated youth), literally 'educated youth', refers to approximately 17 million middle or high school graduates who were sent down to live and work in rural regions during the Cultural Revolution to 'be reeducated by peasants', as a revolutionary act by the government to reduce the difference between rural and urban residents. Many of those rusticated youth spent ten or more years in rural areas and then returned to their native cities in the early 1980s.

[265] Participants #1, 4, 6, 9, and 11.

[266] Participants #6 and 22

members compare their lives with others' troubles through the process of watching a mediation show, which seems to make their current situations less hard to bear. Moreover, it also seems that watching mediation shows may help to reduce stress and make people less depressed[267]. Knowing that others are experiencing a similar or even worse situation might provide one with some comfort and courage to face one's own issues. Compared with those disputes on television, the participants feel that they should be grateful to have a better life than the show participants.

For frequent participants, it seems that they are entertained by the dramatic plotline, and sometimes they also obtain a pleasant and fortunate feeling when comparing their own life with others' misery. As for non-frequent viewers, however, opinions differ. In contrast, frequent viewers might take the mediation show as a stress reliever and do not see the entertainment side. Participant #18 complains that it somehow irritates her that the show is broadcast on a daily basis: 'It is already exhausting after a day's work or study. So we want some relaxing and pleasant programmes rather than loud wrangles'. Contrary to frequent viewers, non-frequent-viewer participants are not interested in others' domestic issues that, actually, seem provoking and unpleasing to them.

Besides, some participants[268] are still sceptical that the show is staged by amateur actors despite efforts by the programme makers to emphasise the genuineness of the show. They doubt if there are so many families' disputes every week and suspect that all disputants are actually played by actors[269]. Other participants do not question the realness of the show; however, they dislike it as they consider it as vulgar, revealing the ugly side of human nature, and especially 'amplifying selfishness and shallowness of those at the bottom of society in Shanghai'[270]. It seems to them that the show is not intended to amuse the audience by revealing people's disputes and arguments over marriage, custody, or heritage. The style can be a joy to them, but the content is not. Entertainment ends where vulgarity begins. For them, the audience would expect to see something more 'positive' on television. Here by 'positive', they seem to refer to inspiring or encouraging stories that can reflect the good of humanity; arguments are negative to them.

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[267] Participants #4, 6, and 9
[268] Participants #18, 21, and 24
[269] Participants #21 and 22
[270] Participant #18

Interestingly, it seems to the audience that domestic disputes and those involved somehow become certain reference points. They can compare their own life or relatives with it, and consequently obtain some consolation by realising that their situation is not that difficult to bear. On the whole, both frequent and non-frequent viewers at times exhibit a sense of feeling smart or feeling better by watching the show. From the disputes of others, they sometimes feel that they would deal with the current case more skilfully if they were in the same situation. In this way, one is able to define oneself as 'sophisticated' and 'mature' by judging or criticising the reactions of disputants on TV. The fun of the programme lies then almost in the possibility to show off and feel superior to others.

The entertainment appeal of the show is perceived in a complex way. Apparently, the audience enjoys the show in terms of its sometimes dramatic content, which they find extraordinary and somewhat 'beyond their imagination'. It seems to them that some cases are comparable to television drama. They enjoy this kind of drama, but at the same time they can empathise with those having disputes on television. This complex process of entertainment in a certain sense is similar to the audience's perception of television drama (Zhu 2008). To them, it is not difficult to enjoy the story and at the same time learn from the mediation. In fact, the structure of the mediation show facilitates this process of enjoyment. The show tells a story, a drama, during the first half and carries out the mediation during the second, which can make the televised and more serious mediation more acceptable.

### *7.3.2 Social Influences and Political Implications of XLNJ*

So far, I have explored the audience's perception of the *XLNJ* show in terms of its entertaining effects. In this section, I will explore participants' opinions on issues revealed on the show, and how they consider the social and political implications. Analysis will be based on the participants' discussions on the following topics: What kind of issues are frequently seen on the show?; What case gave you a deep impression?; and How do you think about the mediation show as a solution for family issues? Moreover, as the survey finding indicated that the audiences learn about legal and mediation knowledge from the show, would they consider it a goal established by the programme makers or some authority to achieve a harmonious society?

First of all, according to the focus group participants, disputes involving properties are frequently seen on the show. They see house property as the most common cause of

family disputes on the mediation show, which is true according the content analysis in Chapter Five. As discussed, although programme makers wish to reduce the number of house-related issues, the tight resources make it difficult. Disputes over money matters and marital problems come second. According to most of our participants[271], including both frequent viewers and non-frequent viewers, the majority of disputes on the show are either about estate properties or problems in marriages. Given that house prices have been rising rapidly, it is true that house property has played a crucial role in many disputes. For instance, relocated families often have disagreements on the distribution of allocated houses and compensation[272]. In some other cases, siblings have different ideas of caring for aged parents and inheritance distribution. Cases of this sort are often seen on the mediation show, and perhaps that is why Bai Wanqing often says that 'sophisticated elders would not get their properties off their hands easily, otherwise is a lack of caution' (*shulian bu tuoshou, tuoshou bu shulian*). One regular viewer who has been watching *XLNJ* since its first broadcast asserts that,

> ' "house property" (*fangzi*) is the key word to all arguments on *XLNJ*. In spite of the fact that a variety of issues were talked about on the show including disputes between siblings, husband and wife, or parent and children, most of them would more or less involve issues over personal or real properties… we often see one party to the dispute request the other to add their name on property ownership certificate or move their *hukou* (household registration) from other regions to Shanghai, not surprisingly, the other party usually refuse such requirement as they worry that by adding name on the deed the requester will become the co-owner of the house property which may jeopardise their own interests in the future. And this oftentimes gives rise to the conflicts between couples, in-laws, or siblings'. [273]

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[271] Participants #1, 3, 4, 5, 10, 12, 15, 17, and 23

[272] Urban constructions required demolitions of many old houses in order to construct modern business or commercial buildings. The original inhabitants were relocated in the outer suburbs, and some of them also received a certain amount of money as compensation.

[273] Participant #1

Some participants mention a case aired not long before the day of the focus group discussion[274]. The dispute was between a couple who had been married for just two years. The wife asked for a divorce for the reason 'emotional incompatibility'. However, the husband suspected that his wife had some scheme because she moved back to stay with her parents nine days after their wedding. Since he had added his wife's name to the ownership certificate of the house that was supposed to be his pre-marital property, he will have to pay his wife about 300,000 RMB (about 36,700 euro) if they divorce. The focus group participants were impressed by this incredible case, and they felt quite aggrieved and accused his wife of utilising marriage for personal interest.

In addition to conflicts originating from disagreements over house properties, poverty seems to be another main cause of unhappy arguments. Some frequent viewers assume that '99 percent of those issues have their roots in poverty'[275]. And nearly half of the frequent-viewer participants mentioned an old saying in China that 'When poverty comes in at the door, love flies out at the window'. As they see it, poverty is a powerful catalyst that magnifies unhappiness in life and turns family squabbles into serious conflicts.

And recently, the audience noticed that domestic violence appears to be an increasingly common origin of disputes between couples in addition to extramarital affairs. Some participants are surprised that sometimes family violence 'even happened to highly-educated people'[276]. The participants are somewhat stunned to find so many violent cases on *XLNJ*, as it seems to them that family violence is uncommon in their life.

Focus groups participants have their own opinions about disputes mediation that are sometimes not accordant with the mediators' ideas. In particular, some frequent viewers reported that sometimes they are not in complete agreement with the mediators' suggestions, though they are loyal audience members and fond of the mediators. One of them experienced domestic violence during her childhood, and she found that,

> 'it is particularly incomprehensible to me that the mediator still attempt[s] to make peace in domestic violence cases. Maybe the elder generation has different

[274] Titled My Wife Stays at Her Parents' Home 5 Days in One Week, What Plot is She Brewing? (qizi yizhou wutian zhu niangjia, jiujingyouheyingmou), aired on September 16th 2013.

[275] Participants #4, 5, and 9

[276] Participant #11

> understanding of life and love than us the younger generation. In my opinion, they can tolerate for the sake of life. While for us, we choose to stay together because of love, material pursues family reason, or a bit of everything. However, family violence is absolutely unforgivable.'[277]

Indeed, the mediators seem to adhere to the belief that 'one shall not destroy a marriage no matter how (*ning chai shizuo miao, bu po yizhuang hun*)'. In both frequent-viewer and non-frequent-viewer groups, participants[278] remarked that the aim of the programme is to make peace. Specifically, some frequent viewers[279] consider this acceptable because 'Chinese people usually suggest couple[s] to tolerate rather than to divorce (*quan he bu quan li*)', and that is why the programme makes every effort to pull couples together. To some of them, the medium of television makes it possible for some cases to be solved. It seems to them that disputants would keep their promise made on the show because it is broadcast to the public: 'under the surveillance of the public, they will have to do what they promise on the show'[280]. They give high credit to the show for its ability to solve disputes, suggesting that, to a certain extent, they lack confidence in their own ability to make a change. It seems that our panel participants believe the show can make a change because they cannot. This somehow confirms what is found in Chapter Six that those who have lower political efficacy are likely to be convinced by the show's ability to promote harmony.

But non-frequent viewers have different opinion; about one-third of them[281] believe that the show's slogan 'building and maintaining a harmonious society' suggests that it is a political goal of the programme makers to foster peace in society and create a harmonious impression for the audience. While they seem to be aware of the aim established by the show, they are not necessarily convinced. In other words, some non-frequent viewers indicate that it is hardly possible to reduce the number of disputes by the efforts of some mediation shows. To them, the show's slogan seems to push this programme towards the 'mouthpiece' role of the Party.

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[277] Participant #12
[278] Participants #3, 13, and 19
[279] Participants #3, 5, 7, and 11
[280] Participant #9
[281] Participants #13, 18, and 19

### 7.3.3 Cultural Perception

With respect to the cultural aspect, I will look into participants' attitudes towards discussing personal issues publicly on TV, i.e. face-saving/losing issues or whether participants find that the show is promoting traditional cultural values. This part of the analysis is based on the participants' discussion about their opinions towards revealing family issues on television, the motivation behind disputants' choice of televised mediation, and the assumed power of the mediation show in solving disputes.

The survey result indicates that the audience does not find it humiliating to watch family disputes on television, but at the same time, they do not consider it a solution to their own issues. They differentiate between themselves as viewers and disputants as objects, suggesting a third-person effect of communication. The boundary between them is clearly divided by participants' using 'they' to refer to disputants and 'I' or 'we' to refer to themselves. To them, it seems acceptable to watch others' disputes on television, but it is a disgrace if they have to go on the show themselves. So, while they regard televised mediation as acceptable, this does not necessarily mean that they perceive it as unharmful to the reputation of the family.

The focus group discussion showed that participants, particularly frequent viewers, hold a somewhat self-contradictory view towards mediation on TV. One the one hand, for most heavy-viewers, mediation TV has become a utilisable option to solve civil domestic disputes as it is 'legally binding' and 'free of charge'. As a dispute solution, it has little to do for them with face-issues, especially 'given the fact that *XLNJ* has broadcast for more than five years, and programmes of a similar type have been more common now, fewer people would make a fuss'[282].

On the other hand, however, the behaviour of airing dirty linen in public did give rise to the concern about issues related to reputation. The majority of participants—including both frequent and non-frequent viewers—see it as dishonourable, if not humiliating, to describe domestic disputes on the show. Nearly all of the participants believe that revealing family conflicts to the public would make oneself the subject of ridicule and bring embarrassment to one's family. They believe that people put their family honour at stake when they pour out their discontent and fight with family on

[282] Participant #4.

TV, seeking consolation and solutions. Such face-losing concern became especially obvious when participants found that they could identify with the disputant.

For instance, Participant #6 once spotted a disputant couple living in a neighbourhood in which she used to live, and she felt that the couple had subjected themselves to ridicule by other neighbours by telling their private issues on the show: '…apparently, our past neighbours –those who love chit-chat–must have been gossiping about them behind their backs for weeks'. Similarly, another participant, #8, was surprised when he recognised a teacher from his old school on a recent episode about domestic violence[283]. He felt sorry for her being a victim of family violence for many years and believed that she must have gathered her courage to seek mediation on *XLNJ*, as he speculated that 'many other schoolmates would recognise her, now she is known to everyone in Shanghai...'. Both participants' words suggested their concern for the disputants' being the object of gossip. It appears that participants distinguish televised mediation as a solution from the act of revealing domestic disputes per se. The former was regarded as an acceptable option, while the latter was seen as less honourable. Many frequent-viewer participants showed empathy with disputants, believing that they must have encountered unsolvable difficulties and had no better choice than turning to the television programme.

Unlike frequent viewers, the majority of non-frequent-viewer participants judged mediation on TV and the revelation behaviour as generally disgraceful. Many of them did not understand why someone would reveal private issues to an unknown audience, as for them quarrelling in front of relatives was already embarrassing, not to mention complete strangers[284]. Therefore, in their eyes turning to *XLNJ* was certainly not a wise, but rather a humiliating, decision. Participants' discussion displayed various reasons for this disapproval, which could be summarised into two main reasons: *disfavour of vulgarity* and *ethical and legal concerns*. Firstly, with disfavour of the vulgarity, most non-frequent-viewer participants thought that TV programmes like *XLNJ* lack culture and taste. They thought the show 'was playing to the gallery by displaying the ugliest side of the human nature' and its purpose was to attract the audience and accordingly 'profiteer from advertising'[285].

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[283] Titled University teacher suffered domestic violence for ten years.

[284] Participants #15, 16, 21, and 24

[285] Participants #13, 15, 16, 21, 23, and 24

Secondly, a majority of the non-frequent participants expressed their doubts about the *ethical and legal concerns*. They alleged that the show stepped over the line when pursuing higher ratings at the expense of people's privacy and misfortune[286]. In their opinions, carrying out civil mediation in private rather than in public is a more appropriate manner, as much as a mark of a civilised and progressive society. In fact, they felt that *XLNJ* tends to present a harmonious result of mediation on TV, but fails to solve the actual problem. After the seemingly happy ending, disputants would continue to 'fight again when they get back home'[287].

When asked their opinions on the value implication of the show, contrasting perceptions were found between frequent and non-frequent-viewer participants. About three-quarters of the frequent participants felt that the show could be seen as positive in terms of its representation of mainstream moral and social values as well as the enlightenment it grants in dealing with family disputes. In contrast, almost all non-frequent viewers accused the show of its allegedly negative implications about social values that more or less impugned the reputation of Shanghai residents.

In the heavy-viewers' opinion, mediators on *XLNJ* were generally able to base their mediation on the law as much as on ethical and moral standards. In other words, given that family disputes were inevitably concerned with interpersonal relations, the mediators' ability to grasp the disputants' psychological point was as important, if not more, as their applicable legal knowledge because logic can convince, but only emotion can motivate. For such cases, emotional persuasion sometimes proved more effective in bringing disputants together again. All of the frequent-viewer participants mentioned that the show reflected real human nature, good and evil. And most of them enjoyed watching mediators 'give the wrong party – such as those who have cheated on their family – a serious moral lesson'[288]. It seemed to them that the show performed its claimed obligation to praise virtue and punish vice, adhering to the social value orientation.

Moreover, the majority of frequent-viewer participants observed that many cases on the show were worth thinking about. The show, to some extent, was like 'a social

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[286] Participants #15, 21, and 24

[287] Participants #17, 19, and 21

[288] Participants #2, 4, 6, 7, 10, and 11

university'[289] where one can learn dispute-handling skills from others and then reflect on their own. Participants shared the same opinion that the lack of communication skills was a common problem for the disputants. Nearly half of the frequent viewers would reflect on their own habits of communication sometimes after watching certain episodes of *XLNJ*, because 'the way you express yourself is particularly important when there is difference of opinion with others, sometimes you can make others happy or angry with just a single word.'[290] It seemed to them that such edifying function could benefit 'both the old and the young' and 'people in different occupations'[291].

By contrast, almost all of the non-frequent viewers hold the opposite view. They remarked that the show was 'vulgar', was characterised by a 'lack of taste', and had the sole purpose to 'attract eyeballs' by 'playing to the audience's curiosity of others' privacy'[292]. For them, no positive values—such as grace, courage, honesty and loyalty—were presented on the *XLNJ* show. Rather, some participants worried that the show would have undesirable consequences. For example, one participant[293] indicated that such mediation programmes should be cut off and removed from the prime time period, because the content was 'not enlightening or motivational, nor does it help to widen our horizon'. Furthermore, other participants made the accusation that too many disputes over the distribution of family property showed on TV would 'wipe out interpersonal trust and bonding'[294] as if 'your wife or children are only concerned about your money'[295].

Moreover, some participants commented from a broader perspective that 'It gives a misleading impression (of Shanghainese), people from outside the city think Shanghainese are stingy and narrow-minded when they watch the show. But in fact, the show only represents a small percentage of people in Shanghai'[296]. It seemed that non-frequent viewers felt that *XLNJ* presents a partial and unjust image of people from

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[289] Participant #5
[290] Participant #6
[291] Participants # 1, 3, 6, 8, and 9
[292] Participants # 13, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, and 24
[293] Participant #16
[294] Participant #18
[295] Participants #18, 20, and 24
[296] Participant #14

Shanghai. They accused that such misrepresentations would affect the image of the Shanghainese.

Most participants in all four focus groups believed that they have the ability to communicate with their family members and resolve family issues. Only one in the frequent-viewer group mentioned that he might consider *XLNJ* as an option if one day he has serious family issues. Most non-frequent viewers did not consider televised mediation as a desirable choice for themselves, because people will talk behind your back when they recognise you on TV.

## 7.4 Conclusion

The discussion above has demonstrated the findings from frequent viewers and non-frequent viewers, who were grouped according to their obtained education level. In general, not many differences are found between higher and lower education groups, but there are evident differences between frequent and non-frequent viewers in terms of their perceptions. The differences might be explained by how much time they spend on watching the show, as the degree of familiarity with the show accordingly leads them to look at it from a different perspective. This confirms the finding from the Chapter Six that media consumption is a significant variable in explaining respondents' perceptions of the show. By and large, frequent viewers' perceptions appear to be more in line with the programme makers' aim, while non-frequent viewers seem to be more suspicious and even tend to doubt the realness of the show. This finding perhaps is not very surprising, as Chinese audiences have been found to be longing for media credibility since the 1980s (Zhang 2009)[297].

One significant feature of the show is its use of dialect, which turns out to be what frequent viewers love and non-frequent viewers hate. Being one important part of culture, speaking and understanding dialect shorten the distance between disputants and television viewers by giving them a feeling of closeness. The need for a familiar native lingual environment appears to be the major reason why our frequent viewers watch the show.

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[297] In a 1982 audience research study conducted by Chinese academics and entertainment enterprises, only 24 percent of the 1,966 people surveyed believed that news broadcasts were credible. See more detailed account in Zhang (2009).

But this cultural element is what non-frequent viewers dislike. It seems that they have been more convinced by the Promoting Mandarin Campaign, and consider slang inappropriate to be used on television. These opposite attitudes towards the dialect might be explained by their opinions associated with Shanghai becoming a migrant metropolitan centre, which requires further research.

Compared with the findings from the survey chapter, where education was identified as a factor explaining the respondents' different perceptions of the show, those with lower education are more likely to be convinced by the show as promoting social harmony, but less likely to watch it for fun or consider it to be associated with a loss of reputation. This difference in education is not evident in the focus group research. In fact, the finding suggests that frequent viewers, regardless of their education, obtain enjoyment—but not necessarily fun—from the show. The difference between the survey and focus group findings may be explained by the terms used in the questions; entertainment may have more dimensions than 'making you laugh' or 'having fun'. Both frequent and non-frequent viewers appear to be curious—more or less—to learn others' stories. The complex enjoyment process of watching consists of various purposes such as 'voyeuristic needs', 'socialising, and 'learning'. This suggests that sometimes viewers' needs and the gratification they obtain from watching a specific show are not necessarily consistent. In this case, the audience might not watch *XLNJ* specifically for fun, but they obtain certain entertainment as a consequence.

The focus group discussion allowed me to approach people and explore not only their uses and perceptions but also their perspectives on issues of contention in the three aspects. As Chapter Five has indicated, it is challenging for programme makers to integrate entertaining elements in the educational aim in the form of making the otherwise serious civil mediation fun and interesting to the audience. This seemingly contentious combination of entertainment and dispute resolution, however, does not appear to be a significant problem for programme viewers, especially the frequent ones. The frequent viewers in this study do not hide their curiosities about others' disputes, which might make good topics in their social life. It seems that blending entertainment with civil mediation does not necessarily prevent the viewers from obtaining information. In fact, the focus group discussions suggest that (frequent) viewers might still obtain information gratification. The programme makers' educational aim seems to reach the audience with this form of entertainised mediation.

As indicated in Chapter Six, the mediation show manages to establish a harmonious image among the respondents; on the whole, our focus group participants were also aware of the political aim of promoting social harmony. This aim seems obvious to them, as it is used as a slogan by the show. But frequent and non-frequent viewers hold different opinions regarding how this aim is implemented. In other words, frequent viewers appear to be more convinced by it and tend to believe that the show has 'positive' influence in society, while non-frequent viewers are more likely to be concerned about its 'negative' influence in publicising domestic disputes. Perhaps frequent viewers are more likely to be interested in learning about disputes in others' families (see Chapter Six), and accordingly, it is not surprising that frequent viewers are more likely to consider televised mediation as a helpful solution. Unlike the producer's concern, frequent viewers do not seem to get bored of house-related issues. To them, the frequently occurring disputes over properties to a certain extent reflect the common issues in society. These viewers seem able to reconcile harmony with disharmony.

With respect to the cultural aspect, i.e. the face-saving matters, though frequent viewers exhibit understanding of disputants' choice of public mediation, they would not see it as a choice for themselves. They share the similar opinions as non-frequent viewers with regard to family reputation. Since the onset of media marketisation, various types of television programmes have been focusing on ordinary people's lives, such as a conventional talk show mentioned in previous chapters. It is likely that people might be receptive to the new genre of programmes such as televised mediation and, again, accommodate the contradictions. But this does not mean that they do not care about 'face' issues. On the whole, they are traditional in terms of dealing with their own issues, but become tolerant of others' choices.

In general, these viewers seem to be tolerant of the contradictions, though they are aware of them. In other words, the audience pays more attention to what they get from the show, including information and entertainment, rather than caring whether others lose their reputation or not.

# Chapter Eight

# CONCLUSION

## 8.1 Introduction

In China's traditional philosophy and culture, 'harmony in society' has been the pursuit of Chinese people for centuries. Such desire for building a harmonious society seems to have become more intense and urgent in the recent decade as a consequence of uneven economic growth. The Hu-Wen government's renovation of the concept of building a 'socialist harmonious society' (*shehui zhuyi hexie shehui*) subsequently became the motto for China. According to the official explanation, a harmonious society is one that is 'democratic and ruled by law, fair and just, trustworthy and fraternal, full of vitality, stable and orderly, and maintains harmony between man and nature' (Angang 2005). As soon as the party leadership declared the utopian priority of building a harmonious China[298], the concept has been implemented in a typical mass mobilisation fashion aimed at everyone and at major institutions in the cultural and educational industries (Zhu 2008). Television practitioners have also joined the effort of promoting social harmony, benevolence, stability, and family values. Among various types of television shows, mediation reality shows place emphasis on Confucian values that coincide with the ideology that the Hu-Wen administration had promoted at the time.

In addition to the general political environment, the marketisation of the media industry has given rise to the emergence of mediation shows. By and large, mediation reality shows have now been popular for more than seven years. Dispute mediations are taking place on provincial and local television channels in different ways including in-studio and in-field mediation. Following *Xin Lao NiangJiu* (新老娘舅, *XLNJ*), many

[298] During the 6th plenary session of the 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the leadership issued a communiqué highlighting the issue of social harmony. See Communiqué of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CCP Central Committee (Xinhua News 2006)

programmes have incorporated people's mediation into their content and established collaboration with local justice bureaus[299]. By echoing the government's objective and utilising the audience's voyeuristic needs, these shows seem to please not only the government but also the audience. These mediation shows share common features in terms of the range of topics; that is, they deliberately restrain the scope of disputes between individuals to topics such as domestic and neighbourhood conflicts, avoiding politically sensitive issues such as labour or medical disputes. At the same time, the show is forecasted on an entertainment channel, giving it an air of fun and laughter. Yet Confucianism has also been seen as valuing 'face' (*mianzi*), and as an often repeated Chinese proverb goes: 'A person needs face as a tree needs bark'. The flip side of saving or gaining face is avoiding shame. However, making private matters public is certainly a shameful behaviour as seen by Chinese people (Zuo 1997) and doing that as a source of entertainment might conflict with the seriousness of the topic and mediation per se. In this sense, the mediation shows that disclosure of personal disputes appears to be potentially contradictory to people's traditional values.

This study therefore focused on the mediation show *XLNJ* to examine the popular phenomenon of the proliferation of mediation programmes and explored what Chinese viewers get out of this show that potentially conflicts with their cultural and political values. Below, I summarise and discuss the main empirical findings of this study. The final section points at the main contributions and limitations of this study, and suggests future studies.

## 8.2 Revisiting the Main Findings

In Chapter One, I posed three sub-questions in order to investigate *XLNJ*'s and Chinese viewers' perceptions of a mediation TV show that potentially conflicts with their cultural and political values: (1) *What do programme makers and official mediators see as the aim of XLNJ?*, (2) *Why do viewers watch XLNJ, and what gratifications do they (not) get out of it?*, and (3) *What do*

[299] For example, True Feelings Mediation (*Zhenqing Tiaojie*) from Qingdao Television and *Help You Till the End* (*Yibang Daodi*) from Shandong Television. The Third Mediation Court has collaborated with the Beijing Justice Bureau and established a homonymic mediation committee, and similarly, The Golden Medal Mediation (*Jinpai Tiaojie*) from Jiangxi Satellite Television has also established a mediation committee titled with the same name of the show.

*local viewers get out of a mediation TV show that potentially conflicts with their cultural and political values?* In the next section, I will bring the findings together to discuss *How do programme makers and the audience come to terms with the potentially contradictory and conflicting entertaining, social and political, and cultural aspects of XLNJ?*

The Production Chapter (Chapter Five) disclosed the four aims of the show as seen by programme makers and mediators. To prevent the similar destiny of its predecessors, the show tactically borrows the feature from the once-popular confessional talk show that focuses on individual relationships. Positioning itself as an in-between of preceding popular talk shows on individuals' relationships and social issues, the show aims to please both the government and the audience. With respect to the marketing aim, audience ratings are critical for the show in a market economy where commercialisation and entertainisation have been taking place in the media sector and channels are less dependent on state subsidies and more on their own income. Thus, a primary aim of the show is to meet the needs of the market. In other words, the disputes on the show often seem to be dramatic and sensational in order to meet the audience's voyeuristic need. Audience rating is a crucial criterion that indicates the programme's performance in competition with others in the media market. Television practitioners constantly pay attention to the rating of their show and make efforts to enhance it by meeting the audience's needs. Bearing this in mind, one approach the show adopts is to package itself as a programme that speaks for ordinary people in order to close the distance between itself and the audience. Entertainment elements have been applied to the making of show, with the same purpose to engage more viewers.

Promoting social harmony is considered to be another important aim for the show. The collaboration with the Shanghai Justice Bureau (SJB) signifies the show's intention to play up to the central call of 'building a harmonious society' by advertising itself as such and working together with the justice department in solving citizens' disputes, propagating harmony. By incorporating the mediation in the show, it promotes social harmony by addressing common social issues and helps to solve people's difficulties.

But the show refrains from going too far in consideration of the aim of avoiding political sensitivity. In this sense, it has to play it safe by focussing on non-sensitive topics—for example, avoiding disputes between individuals and institutions or organisations such as medical or labour disputes—that will not trigger critical discussions or jeopardise the image of official institutions. Rather, the show's strategic collaboration

with the local justice bureau shows its efforts to respond to the central call for a harmonious society by the administration of that period, the Hu-Wen government.

Last but not least, with respect to the educational aim, the show wants to educate its audience with legal knowledge by referring to and applying relevant regulations and policies during the mediation process in the show. Apparently, programme makers are trying to please the party, while at the same time they manage to pursue high market profits. By pleasing both the party and the audience, the show is able to secure its position on the television channel and accordingly extend its lifetime. Programme makers, newspapers, and fans usually celebrate the show for its warm-heartedness in helping many people. Their story can be known to the public, and accordingly, they receive help from the society. By focusing on personal issues, the programme makers believe that the show is helpful in educating the viewers about relevant regulations and policies. By using moral persuasion as an approach in mediation, the show is also claimed to promote traditional moral ethics and values, which echo the call of 'maintaining a harmonious society'. Programme makers in general do not seem concerned with the 'face' issue when 'making personal issues public'. They appear to be more confident in their 'positive' influence in promoting moral standards than concerned about potential issues related to the loss of reputation.

By and large, the aims of the show seem to be well implemented in terms of fostering a positive influence in society, which attracts the attention and appreciation from the local government and propaganda department, which even held seminars to study the programme and its implications. The government officers see the show as a model that reflects the real lives of ordinary citizens and as an ideal platform for promoting legal knowledge[300]. Does the audience appreciate the show in the same way as government officers do, and how do they perceive the aims established by the programme makers?

Both an online survey and focus groups were carried out to explore answers to this question. The online survey revealed that, on average, the first reason why viewers are attracted to the show is a question of language. The use of Shanghainese dialects makes

[300] See for example, an internal report by a district justice bureau (Jinshan Justice Bureau 2008) and another journal article about another justice branch in Shanghai (Yan 2012).

them feel close to the disputants. A component of cultural identity, the audience's first motivation, appears to stress personal identity, sharing the same demographic background with relatively low education and low income. The audience also watches the show with the purpose to learn or seek information that they need, as well as for the purpose of maintaining or bonding with their existing network. Passing time and entertainment appear to be less important reasons that motivate the audience to watch the show. This may well be a socially desirable answer, as publicly admitting these uses might contradict the educational aim of the show. These *uses and gratifications* have been confirmed by focus group discussions, especially those with frequent viewers.

Combining findings from the survey and the focus group research, it seems that the audience—whether they tune into the show for 'entertainment' needs or not—does enjoy the show. In other words, they might not find others' stories on the show hilarious, making them laugh, but they are impressed by the complicated and sometimes extraordinary plots. The enjoyment of drama on the show also constitutes the perception of entertainment, but it seems to be a more subconscious enjoyment, as it is not obvious in the survey but only becomes clear from the focus groups. This finding suggests that 'fun' or 'entertainment' might not be the reasons for watching, but are a way to sustain the audience's interest.

Regardless of how often they watch the mediation show, viewers have been aware of the 'promoting social harmony' aim of the show, but not all of them are convinced by it. This aim might seem obvious as it is included in the programme's opening sequence and is used as a slogan for televised mediation. In general, this aim seems more convincing to socially contented female respondents with low education and low confidence in their ability to make a change in society. The focus group discussions suggest that the participants believe that the nature of television gives it the power to solve difficult disputes. It seems that they expect publicised mediation to make a change in society since they have less confidence in their own abilities. Contrary to the producer's claims, the audience does not seem to get bored of housing as an issue, and they indicate that such issues frequently appear on television. From the survey results and the focus group discussion, the audience is content with the existing topic range, and they do not exhibit the desire for other issues.

The audience's perception of cultural aspects, however, appears to be self-contradictory. On the one hand, they exhibit empathy towards the disputants in

terms of their decision to make private issues public. On the other hand, however, they do not feel the same way when talking about themselves. In other words, they would not consider televised mediation as an option if they have disputes to solve. This suggests that Chinese 'face' still matters to them.

## 8.3 Discussion of Findings and Issues of Contention

Since its emergence, the *XLNJ* show has been enjoying high ratings for more than half a decade, which subsequently inspires the flourishing of reality mediation shows on TV across the nation. The case of Ms Zhang and Ms Yang described in the Chapter One is not uncommon on these mediation shows. Disputes regarding family responsibilities, marriage problems, and/or financial properties often relate to issues with a historical background. The consequence of market liberalisation is manifested in those issues. In fact, the reality mediation show, as a popular culture phenomenon shaped both by market and state forces, is a discursive site manifesting complex Confucian legacies and ideological promotion of propaganda.

*XLNJ* was the first show to collaborate with a legal institution, the Shanghai Justice Bureau, which defines its dual role: making profits through entertainised production while at the same time promoting harmonious dispute solution to play up to the authority. The complex nature of the show—mixing entertainment with the political and the cultural—raises issues of contention. In the following sections, I will bring empirical findings together trying to compare the aim of the show and the audience perception in terms of the different aspects (see Table 8.1), and I will also explore whether programme makers and the audience recognise these tensions, and how they deal with them.

### *8.3.1 Political Aspects*

As seen by the programme makers, the show *XLNJ* aims to entertain, promote social harmony, and educate ordinary citizens. These three aims are not exclusive but rather intertwined. It seems that the mediation show has learned two lessons from earlier talk shows: first, there is a balance between meeting the audience's needs and the State Administration of Radio Film and TV (SARFT) requirements, meaning that programme makers should restrain their desire for making the show too sensational. Secondly, the range of topics should be confined to interpersonal issues in order to avoid politically sensitive issues. Failure to live up to these lessons might induce intervention from

administrative or governmental institutions and would very likely lead to the end of the show, as happened to others. Although the marketisation has given rise to the emergence of various television productions, the media are still subject to government control. Actually, belonging to the Shanghai Media Group, the Shanghai Television is under the guidance of the Shanghai Propaganda Department, and the media transformation has not changed that. As other scholars have also observed, there is a tension between media marketisation and the state's attempt to control (see, for example, Li 2014a, Zhao 2008, and Stockmann and Gallagher 2011). This, to a certain extent, explains why programme makers have developed the four aims of the show, i.e. to attract large audiences to educate the audience with legal knowledge, to divert political sensitivity, and to promote social harmony. These aims explain the show's effort in looking for a balance in tensions and a secured position in the market.

On the other side, facing the fact that media ownership remains in the hands of the state, media practitioners such as the programme makers in this study are looking for their own way to cope with the status quo. The collaboration with the local justice bureau is apparently one decision that benefits the show even though it now only exists in name. To the programme makers of the *XLNJ* and similar shows, the nature of such collaboration plus media affiliation with the Propaganda Department have set the tone for the show to limit topics to personal or family issues and refrain from major disputes that involve allegations of abuse of power by government officials or state institutions. This restraint of disputes does not seem to bother the programme makers who adopt it into the selection criteria for the show. As far as *XLNJ* is concerned, the programme producer and directors do not mind carrying out self-censorship in order to ensure that the content stays within the permissible scope. Their efforts are appreciated by the local government and propaganda department who view them as a means to advance a harmonious society.

While the show refrains from covering politically sensitive issues and pays attention mainly to family disputes, the programme makers and especially the producer appear to be concerned about the recurring housing issues on the show. Like the story of Ms Zhang in Chapter One, disputants to housing disputes often involve the generation of the sent-down youth (*zhiqing*), and the disagreements about house properties often involve *hukou* problems. These family disputes reflect, to a certain extent, issues facing a changing society with inequality of wealth, defects in policies, and unexpected consequences of

economic reforms. The frequent appearance of such issues on the show seems to worry the producer, who argues that the audience have had enough of such topics and that the number of such cases should be reduced. But it seems contentious, as it turns out, that housing issues remain the most common topic of the show (see Chapter Five). In spite of the selection criteria, this topic seems to be inevitable. Given the rising housing prices and the difficulty of household registration in urban cities (for example, see the case in Chapter One), it is understandable that property distribution has become common in many family disputes. In fact, our respondents do not seem to be fed up with such topics, partially for the reason that housing issues are close to life and common in society (see Table 8.1, and also Chapters Six and Seven). While the frequent housing issue does not seem to be a problem for the audience, it worries the producer. As for the producer, the precedent talk show taught him that social issues can sometimes be sensitive; in this sense, his argument on the audience's being uninterested in housing issues might be explained by his concern that the frequently-appearing topic would upset the authority and affect its attitude towards the show.

**Table 8.1 Comparison of programme makers' aim and audience perception**

| | Programme Makers' Aim | Audience's Perception |
|---|---|---|
| **Political Aspect** | Promoting social harmony | Recognised by frequent viewers |
| | Avoiding political sensitivity/ divert political sensitivity | Reflection of real life |
| | Educational aim | Learning / information seeking |
| **Entertainment Aspect** | Marketing / entertaining | Dramatic/ sensational |
| | Dialect as entertaining element | Closeness / personal identity |
| **Cultural Aspect** | 'Saving-face' not a problem | Moral face / social face |

Table 8.1 summarises the aims of the show as seen by the programme makers and according to the audience's perception.

Not all of the viewers are convinced by the show's influence in promoting social harmony, though they all seem to be aware of such a goal. The regular viewers of the show are more likely to see the show as having a positive role in society to promote social harmony. This can largely be explained by the time they spent on watching the show. For frequent viewers, their ritualised viewing involves the use of television for diverse reasons

and a greater attachment to the medium itself (Rubin 1985). Such attachment with the show may somehow enable them to be more empathetic with disputants, while non-frequent viewers appear to be more aware of the limited ability of the show to reduce the number of disputes.

### *8.3.2 Entertainment Aspects*

By collaborating with the Justice Bureau, *XLNJ* has institutionally mixed entertainment and the political. Turning the otherwise serious civil mediation into a popular show on an entertainment channel can be a challenging task, but it does not seem difficult to the programme makers who mostly have experience in making entertainment programmes. As shown in Table 8.1 (and also Chapter Five), in the pursuit of profit, programme makers adopt editing techniques to make the show entertaining and attractive, such as using sensational titles for episodes and re-organising the storyline to emphasise the 'love and hate'[301] between disputants. Learning the lessons from the confessional talk shows that are mostly staged, *XLNJ* also placed emphasis on its 'realness' to please the audience as well as the authority.

The show makers achieve their marketing aim as indicated by the continuous high ratings of the show. But the method of story-telling might not be appreciated by everyone, which is suggested by the findings from the empirical research on the audience. In spite of the show's emphasis on 'realness', some focus group participants in this study actually have their doubts because they find some cases exaggerated and unbelievable. The editing techniques may make the story sensational, but while some see television as a mirror of society, others hold reservations about its credibility. This is hardly surprising, as Chinese media used to lack credibility (see, for example Zhang 2009)[302]. It is possible that those staged confessional talk shows strengthened the audience's impression of low credibility. Findings from focus group discussions suggest that, in a similar format of entertainment, it might take the mediation show some time to enhance its credibility and make people believe that it tells real stories. Meanwhile, the dialect used in the show minimises the distance between the audience and disputants on TV. The same language helps and urges

[301] Focus group participants #5 and #13

[302] According to the first Chinese audience research co-organised by Chinese academics and entertainment enterprises in 1982, only 24 percent of the 1,966 people surveyed found the media credible.

the viewers to identify and empathise with others. Dialect as an entertaining element might not be appreciated by all and might explain why frequent viewers, who also watch other programmes in Shanghainese, doubt the realness of the show less than non-frequent viewers.

While the audience sometimes finds disputes on the show dramatic, they do not seem to consider the show as entertainment that is fun and that makes people laugh. Although sometimes a sensational title may trigger their curiosity, they do not necessarily recognise it as entertaining. They might enjoy the dramatic story subconsciously while claiming that they learn something from the show rather than obtain enjoyment. It is likely that they do not distinguish information from entertainment when mediation is presented in an entertainment format.

The relation between entertainment and politics is subtle in China. The show has to be careful not to upset the authorities or the propaganda department by being too politically sensitive or too sensational. To survive the market and political environment, media practitioners use a set of methods to ensure that their production pleases the local audience and the authorities alike. An effective way seems to be to market an image that plays up to the authority, which is used not only by the media but also popular culture (see, for example, Fung 2003). Shows like *XLNJ* strategically place themselves in the same line as the government and manage to 'repackage' their tabloid-style content in ways that appear to promote a harmonious society as the government wishes (Kong and Hawes 2014). In this case, the programme makers might well reach their educational aim by converting information into entertainment, without upsetting their audience.

### 8.3.3 Cultural Aspects

*XLNJ* benefits from the collaboration with the Shanghai Justice Bureau in terms of building up its reputation and credibility. But the hierarchical administrative structure has prevented the show from having a sufficient source of cases and consequently leads to the current situation where this collaboration only exists in name. While the programme makers decided to regain control of case selection by relying on its hotlines as a source of dispute cases, they realise that whether the story can be produced or not largely depends on the callers' willingness to go public voluntarily. In fact, disputants hesitate to go on the show and may change their mind at the last minute. As it turns out, the production team of *XLNJ* have comprised with disputants' retreat from attendance and carry out

mediation with only one party's presence. This suggests that 'losing-face' is still a concern for ordinary people when deciding turn to the mediation for solution, even though the programme makers claim that 'people have nothing to lose'[303].

The show seems to have conflicting intentions, as it promotes the Confucian 'harmony' value at the cost of the 'face' issues. The audience, particularly frequent viewers, seem to be fine with such contradiction. As seen by them, televised mediation offers disputants a platform to solve their issues, which is more important than the 'face' concern. But this reputation issue appears to be quite confusing here because the audience exhibits different attitudes if they were to choose dispute solution for themselves. The concept of reputation may be abstruse and difficult to understand even to Chinese people. For example, Lu Xun, a well-known Chinese intellectual who endeavoured his whole life to study the national character of Chinese people and the reconstruction of Chinese culture, said, 'What is going on about "face"? It is wise not to think about it. When you think of it, you will get confused (Quoted in Mou and Yi 1991, 126)'. It requires a further understanding of the concept of 'face' to understand people's conflicting attitude towards the reputation issue. As Hwang (2006, 2012) indicates, the Chinese usage of face can be divided into two broad categories, moral face (*lian*) and social face (*mianzi*). Moral face is more basic and is the baseline for being an upright person, a reputation that should not be lost in any situation. Social face is acquired through personal talent or achievement (Hwang 2012). In this sense, it explains why people are inclined not to choose televised mediation for themselves, as they value their moral face. This suggests that when watching others' disputes on television, their 'voyeuristic' needs surpass their concern for others' face issues. Indeed, since the marketisation of the television industry, there is an increasing number of programmes displaying ordinary people's lives to the public. The audience might have become accustomed to this phenomenon. The conflicting attitude towards one's own and others' face highlights the tension between tradition and modernity. Traditional values are subject to change, and the media undoubtedly play a role in this.

Media marketisation in China has indeed encouraged diversity in production. However, marketisation with Chinese characteristics does not necessarily lead to private

[303] Interviewee #1

ownership of television. The implicit official attitude towards television can be read from a rule '*shiye danwei, qiye hua guanli*', which means that the ownership of television remains in the hands of the state. The transition of Chinese television from a politically-oriented pattern to a market-oriented one occurred under the preconditions that 'the ideological function of television remains foremost and the operation of television responds to market disciplines' (Xu 2013). The media are more independent economically, but not politically.

The marketisation of the television industry and the changing political environment forced television practitioners to produce contents that can satisfy both the market and the authority. In this study, mediation seems to have been used as a combination of education, control, propaganda, and entertainment. In this way, *XLNJ* and similar shows are able to stay mostly within the thematic and pictorial confines of what the Party permits, and still turn a profit (Zhu 2008, 136). While mediation shows are seen by officials and programme makers as alternative solutions to family conflicts, they neglect the traditional 'saving-face' issue.

Our respondents perceive the show differently relative to each other. They seem more likely to obtain enjoyment from the dramatic storyline and at the same time are aware of the 'harmonious' image the show endeavours to build. It does not seem difficult for the audience to deal with the cultural contention regarding face issues as they distinguish moral face from social face, with the former being more essential than the latter. The audience not only identifies with but also distinguishes themselves from the disputants on TV. What appears consistent with earlier studies[304] (Zhang 2002, 2009) is that the audience still exhibits the need for information, particularly information that relates to their life. To do that in an entertaining way is not seen as contradictory. Programmes paying attention to citizens' lives (*minsheng*) such as mediation shows may well meet both needs.

[304] Early study on the Chinese audience indicate that their reasons for watching changed very little from 1987 to 2002. 'Entertainment', 'knowledge of policies of the party and the government', 'learning current news and politics', and 'general education' have consistently ranked as the top four.

## 8.4 Limitations, Contributions, and Future Prospects

Looking back and reflecting on the process of my qualitative research, this study has admittedly, some points for future improvement. If more and specific statements had been adopted, the result of the *uses and gratifications* approach would have revealed more critical audience perceptions. In consideration of the questionnaire length, I have cut down the number of statements, which might have affected the outcome. This inadequacy may partly explain different perceptions of, for example, entertainment between survey and focus group participants. When doing qualitative research, especially group discussions such as utilised in focus groups, the researcher should create an environment that is as comfortable as possible, so as to help the group to continue talking. It is preferable that the researcher does not try to derive meaning from conversations while they talk, as this will divert the researcher's attention and can unintentionally cause them to speak in an academic way, which is not helpful in the qualitative research. My experience taught me that it is better to only focus on how to get every participant to talk more rather than think too much about one particular participant's exact words.

This study focused only on the production and the audience side of mediation shows. For various reasons, I did not include disputants as research objects, which requires more time, more patience, and extensive commitment to contact those disputants and probe their real feelings. In future studies, one may consider interviewing people seeking solutions from televised mediation to provide a thorough understanding of the reasons why they choose mediation on screen at the cost of losing face. At this stage, it is important to acknowledge that the data come from a relatively small N, so the findings of this research can not be generalized. In a sense, it is worth noticing that such data, as a first start to tap into the audience, can say something about a set of nuanced relationships between social actors and audience perceptions. More abundant and higher-quality data from a larger population should produce stronger results.

This study of the mediation reality show and its audience has made a modest contribution to the body of literature as well as the empirical audience research in mainland China. First of all, it provides a prism through which to understand the subtle relation between the media and the authoritarian state in the course of economic reforms. Indeed, marketisation and commercialisation impact on individual's everyday life and on the media industry. After more than three decades, the government recognised social

discontent stemming from the consequences of economic reforms. The then Hu-Wen administration turned to the Confucian ideas of equality and balance for possible solutions. Their decision on 'building a harmonious society' implied that there are 'unharmonious' problems associated with marketisation and rapid economic growth. Building and maintaining social stability is partly an effort for the then Hu-Wen government to preserve Communist rule in China (Zhu, 2008), but it is also pivotal to the realization of Xi Jinping's 'China Dream'.

Meanwhile, the marketisation with Chinese characteristics does not change the ownership of television, but creates a dilemma for producers, as Yin (2008) suggests (see Chapter Three), with responsibility on the one hand and freedom on the other. The proliferation of entertainment reality programmes is a consequence of the severe competition in the television market. Entertainment-oriented content as politically safe and economically lucrative might be the logic behind the vibrant growth of these shows. At the same time, the propaganda authorities are concerned about the tendency of 'excessive entertainisation' and valgarisation (Bai 2015). More importantly, their expectation for the media is to render social inequalities invisible rather than amplify them and to educate rather than deteriorate moral values. The relation between the media and the state seems to be reciprocal at this point, because the latter seems to be satisfied with such a role of the media and considers it a helpful tool in portraying a picture of harmonious society and responsive government.

Secondly, this study adds a modest contribution to the existing literature on entertainment and politics in China, and life-counselling programmes in particular. Life-counselling shows like *XLNJ* manage to serve the twin masters of the party-state and the market: they pay attention to social issues and people's grievances but at the same time confine topics to a non-sensitive range, responding to the government's social governance campaign. These programmes defuse social conflicts by providing viewers with an impression that most problems and issues can be solved. Packaging their political intent in the format of entertainment, life-counselling shows like *XLNJ* provide advice on a wide range of 'life issues' from professionals or experts such as mediators, lawyers, psychologists, which can be arguably convincing for certain groups of viewers. As seen by the audience, these programmes are not likely to have a hidden agenda other than transmitting technical, scientific, objective and practical knowledge (Sun and Zhao 2009, Sun 2014, 2015).

Compared with studies on media entertainment and politics in Western democracies where entertainment such as soft news is blamed for the image of malaise that creates a constant ambience of public mistrust (see also Chapter Three), this study suggests that this media malaise theory developed in the liberal democracies might not be automatically applicable to an authoritarian state like China. The situation seems to be the opposite: politics or information packaged in an entertainment format is more likely to be acceptable and effectual. This is partly because news in the government-run media is prone to censorship and thus have a notorious credibility problem (Shirk 2011). In a transition period towards marketisation with Chinese characteristics, the Party still attempts to maintain strict control, which gradually push the media towards the direction of entertainisation, because entertainment programmes generally enjoy a greater freedom (Li 2014a). Infotainment like life-counselling programmes in a sense may be more informative than a news programme in terms of providing people with advice and knowledge relevant to individual's life, which echoes earlier studies in Northern Europe (see Brants 1998, Brants and Neijens 1998).

Furthermore, the study taps into the Chinese audience by combining an online survey and a focus group, which provides a humble foundation for further research on audiences in China. As mentioned in Chapter Three, there has been increasing attention devoted to mediation shows and similar formats. But most studies lack solid empirical evidence, especially evidence about the audience's perception. This study attempts to illustrate how the contradiction in and of a mediation show is perceived by the audience by combining online surveys and focus groups. The findings may be helpful for future studies that look into public opinion regarding social issues and government responses.

From the perspective of the television viewer, this study may supplement empirical findings that are in line with other studies that analyse media and political practice in China regarding the government's expectation of the media from a top-down perspective (for example, see Hawes and Kong 2013, Kong 2014, Sun 2014, 2015). Admittedly, findings in this study are not from a large sample population, they provide a prism through which one might see how Chinese media can be simultaneously 'spectacular and mundane, ideologically overbearing and extremely entertaining, and subservient and defiant of the Party-state' (Sun 2014).

As a first tap into the audience perception of an entertainment reality show, the *uses and gratifications* approach provides the possibility to explore a rough idea of what motives

people might have to watch mediation shows, which may provide a foundation for future audience studies of life-counselling shows in general. Future studies can also extend the present research by covering mediation shows broadcasted on channels across various regions. It would be interesting to conduct a comparison of a wide range of audiences, which will provide a deeper and more general understanding of audience perception towards reality shows. It is also necessary to combine various methods in future research to explore how market imperatives are balanced with political imperatives.

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# Appendix

**Appendix 1 List of Mediation Programmes (up to 2012)**

| No. | Programme Title | Channel | Location |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Listener in the world (*zhiyin renjian*) | Channel Five | Zhengzhou |
| 2 | The true, the good and the beautiful (*Zhenshanmei*) | Public Channel | Hunan |
| 3 | The helpful lady assistant (*Zhenqing nv bangban*) | Law Channel | Jilin |
| 4 | True Feelings Mediation (*Zhenqing Tiaojie*) | Life Channel | Qingdao |
| 5 | Seeking ture emotion (*Xunqingji*) | City Channel | Hunan |
| 6 | Seeking ture emotion (*Xunqingji*) | News Channel | Hainan |
| 7 | New Elder Uncle (*Xin Laoniangjiu*) | Entertainment Channel | Shanghai |
| 8 | Mood (*xinqing*) | Life Channel | Liaoning |
| 9 | Secret Code of the Mind (*Xinling Mima*) | Life Channel | Beijing |
| 10 | Xiao Guo, your errand boy (*Xiao Guo paotui*) | Science and Education Channel | Shanxi |
| 11 | Xiao Guo, your errand boy (*Xiao Guo paotui*) | Satellite Television | Shanxi |
| 12 | 45 minutes live on the scene (*xianchang 45 fenzhong*) | Movie and TV Channel | Inner Mongolia |
| 13 | Highlights in the night (*wanjian kandian*) | News Channel | Wuxi |
| 14 | Who is talking (*shui zai shuo*) | Youth Channel | Beijing |
| 15 | Emotion Search (*qinggan da sousuo*) | Financial Channel | Hubei |
| 16 | Touching 8pm (*qingdong 8 dian*) | Politics and Law Channel | Changsha |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 17 | Qiantang Elder Uncle(Qiantang Lao Niang Jiu) | Life and leisure Channel | Zhejiang |
| 18 | Uncle the big stone (*Niangjiu da shitou*) | Finance and Life Channel | Ningbo |
| 19 | Golden Medal Mediation (*Jinpai Tiaojie*) | Satellite Television | Jiangxi |
| 20 | Black and White observation room (*hei bai guanchashi*) | Education Channel | Jilin |
| 21 | Mediator (*Heshi Lao)* | Pearl Channel | Hangzhou |
| 22 | Hangzhou old brother (*hangzhou lao dage*) | Life Channel | Hangzhou |
| 23 | Wide-angle of life *(Guangjiao Minsheng*) | Country Channel | Jilin |
| 24 | Unusual Help (feichang bangzhu) | Farmer Channel | Hebei |
| 25 | Ordinary People Got Trouble (*Fanren You Shi*) | City Channel | Chongqing |
| 26 | Mediating secret emotional code (*Tiaohe qinggan mima*) | Movie and TV Channel | Shijiazhuang |
| 27 | Mediation (*Tiao He*) | Movie and TV Channel | Shijiazhuang |
| 28 | The Third Mediation Court (*Disan Tiaojie shi)* | Education and sciences Channel | Beijing |
| 29 | Di long dao dao guai | Economics Info Channel | Chengdu |
| 30 | Loving Mediation (*Aixin Tiaojie*) | Public Channel | Henan |
| 31 | 80's theatre (*80hou juchang*) | Channel Young | Shanghai |
| 32 | 80's theatre (*80hou juchang*) | Education Channel | Shandong |
| 33 | 80's theatre (*80hou juchang*) | Satellite Television | Ningxia |
| 34 | 80's theatre (*80hou juchang*) | Entertainment Channel | Nanjing |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 35 | 80's theatre (*80hou juchang*) | Entertainment Channel | Wuxi |
| 36 | 80's theatre (*80hou juchang*) | Life Channel | Liaoning |
| 37 | Man's world (*renjian*) | Satellite Television | Jiangsu |
| 38 | Don't lie to me (bie dui wo shuohuang) | General Entertainment Channel | Jiangsu |
| 39 | Help you till the end (*Yi bang daodi*) | | Shandong |
| 40 | Super Mediation (*Chaoji Tiaojie*) | Satellite Channel, Jiangsu | Jiangsu |
| 41 | Both Parties (*jiafang yifang*) | Channel Young, Shanghai | Shanghai |
| 42 | Here comes the litigant (*youqing dangshiren*) | Life Channel | Nanjing |
| 43 | Magic cube of Happiness (*xingfu mofang*) | Dragon Satellite TV | Shanghai |
| 44 | Mediation Scene (*Tiaojie xianchang*) | Satellite Television | Guizhou |
| 45 | Meddler lady the Mediator (*xianshi po heshilao*) | News Channel | Wenzhou |
| 46 | Face-to-face mediation (*Tiaojie mianduimian*) | Satellite Television | Hubei |
| 47 | No.1 Mediation (*Di Yi tiaojie*) | City Channel | Shenzhen |

## Appendix 2 Observation Checklist

| **Observed Items** | Yes☑ | No☒ | N/A○ | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|

**Pre-production**

1) Is the issues selected through discussion among producer, editor and mediator?

2) Are there any topics not selected? For what reasons?
3) When they contact parties to a dispute to come to the studio, what do they say?

4) How do producers and editors decide the running order of the programme?

5) How do they decide which mediator will be in the programme?
6) Is there a running order of the programme?
7) How do the producer and the editors decide the order the programme?
8) Does the mediator or the editor review relevant regulations in advance?

**Production**

1) Does the programme production team separate parties to a dispute before filming
2) Does the mediator talk to both parties to a dispute before the filming and mediate their conflicts?
3) Does the editor tell the parties to a dispute what to say and what not before filmin
4) Does the editor/producer give instructions or hints to the presenter to investigate the conflict more deeply? If so, when?
5) Does the editor/producer give instructions or hints to the presenter to change topic during the programme recording? If so, when?
6) Does the editor/producer give instructions or hints to the presenter / mediator to change the topic in order to guide the participant's emotion?
7) Is there a break during the filming?
8) If there is a break, does the editor/mediator talk to parties to a dispute?
9) Does any participant lose control of his/her emotions during the filming?

10) What does the producer / editor do if the participant lose control of their emotion
11) Do both parties to a dispute accept the mediator's suggestions?
12) If any party refuses to accept the mediator's suggestions, will the producer/editor try to persuade him/her to accept?
13) If the mediation fails to reach an agreement, will the producer/editor ask participants pretend that they come to an agreement?
14) How long does it take to finish the programme filming?
15) Does the mediator continue to mediate after the filming?
16) After the programme filming, do the parties to a dispute leave together peacefully
17) What does the producer/editor say to the parties to a dispute after the filming?

**Post-Production**

1) Have any parts of the programme been cut out?
2) What kind of parts is cut out from the original recording tape?
3) Does the editor change the order of the topics / issues in the programme?
4) What has been added during the editing period?

## Appendix 3 Interview Guide

**Interview Guide I**

**Programme makers**

1) Can you tell me something about your role in the mediation programme?
2) Can you describe the job function and responsibility of your job?
3) How long have you been working for this programme?

**Mediators**

1) Why did you decide to join?
2) Did you have experience in mediation before? (and how was that?)
3) Does the Shanghai Justice Bureau give you suggestions regarding your mediation style? (what kind of relationship do you have with the SJB?)

**About: Production and Traditional Cultural Value**

4) We know that China has a long history of mediation, in your opinion, what do you think are the differences between television mediation and traditional mediation?
5) In your opinion, why do people choose to come to the television programme for mediation rather than other options?
6) In this television programme, people talk about their family issues in public, which may be regarded as 'losing face' in our traditional culture. In this sense, this programme may look contrary to traditional culture value. What is your opinion about this? What do you think about the 'face' problem of these mediation seekers?
7) What kind of Chinese cultural values do you think is reflected in this programme?
8) What do you think of the role television plays in the mediation show? (In what ways does it affect or improve or entertainise the mediation effect?)

**About: Social and Political issues**

9) What issues do you think are mostly put forward for mediation?

10) Are there any special or unforgettable case / experiences in your past work? What is it about?
11) Are there issues not being discussed? What are they about (probe: re the authorities, etc.?)
12) Who decides what issues are up for mediation (probe: influence by official mediation bureau, by TV authorities, others)?
13) In the programme there is a mediation agreement presented for both parties to sign. When did you prepare that agreement? Are the details in the agreement discussed in advance? And if so, with whom?

**About: Entertainisation**

14) What do you think about the rating of this programme?
15) What do you think attracts people to watch this programme?
16) From your point of view, what do you expect audiences to get out of this programme?

**Interview Guide II**

**Audience Mediators**

1) Can you tell me how you joined today's programme? (did you call the hotline to join or some episode editor selected you?)
2) Is this the first time you join this programme as an audience mediator?
3) Did you have experience in mediation before?

**About: Traditional Cultural Value**

4) We know that China has a long history of mediation, in your opinion, what do you think are the differences between television mediation and traditional mediation?
5) In your opinion, why do people come to the television programme for mediation?
6) In this television programme, people talk about their family issues in public, which is regarded as 'losing face' in our traditional culture. In this sense, this programme may look contrary to traditional culture values. What is your opinion about this? What do you think about the 'face' problem of these mediation seekers?
7) What kind of Chinese cultural values do you think is reflected in this programme?
8) What do you think the role that television plays in the mediation show? (Does it affect or improve or entertainise the mediation effect?)

**About: Social and Political issues**

9) What issues do you think are mostly put forward for mediation?
10) Do you think that there are some issues not being discussed? What are they about (probe: re the authorities, etc.?)
11) What issues do you think should be added or discussed more in this programme?
12) If your family of friends have disputes, will you recommend them to come to this programme for mediation?

**About: Entertainisation**

13) What do you think of this experience as an audience mediator?
14) What attracts you to watch this programme?
15) What do you think is the influence of this programme?

## Appendix 4 Interviewee List

| Date | Intrviewee No. | Description |
|---|---|---|
| 2010-12-10 & 2011-10-09 | 1 | Producer |
| 2011-10-23 | 2 | Director (chief) |
| 2011-10-13 | 3 | Director |
| 2011-10-13 | 4 | Director |
| 2011-10-23 | 5 | Director (senior) |
| 2011-10-13 | 6 | Hotline Receptionist |
| 2011-10-14 | 7 | Show Presenter |
| 2011-10-23 | 8 | Cameraman |
| 2011-10-17 | 9 | Ordinary Mediator |
| 2011-10-17 | 10 | Ordinary Mediator |
| 2011-10-17 | 11 | Ordinary Mediator |
| 2011-10-18 | 12 | Ordinary Mediator |
| 2011-10-20 | 13 | Audience Commentator |
| 2011-10-20 | 14 | Hotline Receptionist |
| 2011-10-18 | 15 | TV Mediator |
| 2011-10-21 | 16 | Audience Commentator |
| 2011-10-21 | 17 | Audience Commentator |
| 2011-10-14 | 18 | TV Mediator |
| 2011-10-22 | 19 | TV Mediator |
| 2011-10-21 | 20 | Audience Commentator |

**Appendix 5 A Full List of XLNJ Episodes in 2013**

Note: Special issues on national holidays are highlighted below.

| Issue number | Date | Title | Ratings |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1790 | 1.1 | 《新老娘舅》元旦特别节目 | 4.40 |
| 1791 | 1.2 | 我就是麻辣娘舅 万峰 | 4.30 |
| 1792 | 1.3 | 知心大姐暖人心 蔚兰 | 4.30 |
| 1793 | 1.4 | 聚少离多 情转薄 | 6.00 |
| 1794 | 1.5 | 结婚几十年为钱吵不停？ | 5.20 |
| 1795 | 1.6 | 女友要上“达人秀”（上） | 5.40 |
| 1796 | 1.7 | 女友要上“达人秀”（下） | 5.50 |
| 1804 | 1.15 | 结婚几十年 究竟谁出轨？ | 5.80 |
| 1805 | 1.16 | 老公遇到旧情人 我就去流浪！ | 6.10 |
| 1806 | 1.17 | 赌徒的最后忏悔能否留住亲情？ | 4.50 |
| 1807 | 1.18 | 花心老公的最后保证能否相信？ | 4.20 |
| 1808 | 1.19 | 父母偏心我就放煤气？ | 5.00 |
| 1809 | 1.20 | 孝顺孙子为何痛哭流涕？ | 6.40 |
| 1810 | 1.21 | 我爱妻子胜过我的生命 | 5.80 |
| 1818 | 1.29 | 90 后女孩儿的叛逆“复仇”之路（下） | 6.30 |
| 1819 | 1.30 | 30 岁再婚夫妻为何又走离婚路？ | 5.20 |
| 1820 | 1.31 | 超生家庭遭遇煤气爆炸后 | 5.40 |
| 1821 | 2.1 | “偷瞄”丈夫就挨打？ | 4.90 |
| 1822 | 2.2 | 我向婆婆吐口水！ | 5.40 |
| 1823 | 2.3 | 为何丈夫只顾父母却冷落我？ | 4.20 |
| 1824 | 2.4 | 妻子竟为打麻将不要这个家？ | 4.60 |
| 1832 | 2.12 | 老娘舅回娘家 3 梁山伯与祝英台 | 3.00 |
| 1833 | 2.13 | 好赌前夫别烦我 | 4.90 |
| 1834 | 2.14 | 妻子为何不愿上班？ | 6.90 |
| 1835 | 2.15 | 产后抑郁症毁了我们的感情？ | 6.10 |
| 1836 | 2.16 | 大人小孩都任性 85 后婚姻遭瓶颈 | 5.00 |
| 1837 | 2.17 | 我养了两个“白眼狼”？（上） | 6.80 |
| 1838 | 2.18 | 我养了两个“白眼狼”？（下） | 6.50 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1846 | 2.26 | 丈夫十年不回家 我要跟他离婚！（下） | 5.90 |
| 1847 | 2.27 | “错误”的婚姻割裂母女情 | 4.00 |
| 1848 | 2.28 | “歇斯底里”的丈夫毁了我们的家？（上） | 4.70 |
| 1849 | 3.1 | “歇斯底里”的丈夫毁了我们的家？（下） | 7.20 |
| 1850 | 3.2 | 80 岁老公为何离家不归？ | 5.90 |
| 1851 | 3.3 | 男友为我离婚 为何又抛弃我？（上） | 5.50 |
| 1852 | 3.4 | 男友为我离婚 为何又抛弃我？（下） | 5.30 |
| 1860 | 3.12 | “金龟婿”不懂“灰姑娘”的心（上） | 5.20 |
| 1861 | 3.13 | “金龟婿”不懂“灰姑娘”的心（下） | 6.40 |
| 1862 | 3.14 | 花甲老公去了 KTV 之后（上） | 5.80 |
| 1863 | 3.15 | 花甲老公去了 KTV 之后（下） | 5.80 |
| 1864 | 3.16 | 坐拥千万家产为何守不住婚姻？（上） | 6.60 |
| 1865 | 3.17 | 坐拥千万家产为何守不住婚姻？（下） | 6.50 |
| 1866 | 3.18 | 为了孙子我与全家为敌（上） | 4.60 |
| 1874 | 3.26 | 丈夫小气还是妻子太挥霍？（下） | 6.00 |
| 1875 | 3.27 | 跟我谈恋爱为何前女友还要叫你去开房？ | 4.80 |
| 1876 | 3.28 | 叫你爸妈死 跟我去贵州？ | 4.40 |
| 1877 | 3.29 | 神秘骚扰短信幕后黑手究竟是谁？ | 4.90 |
| 1878 | 3.30 | 妻子曾为我自杀 如今为何变了心？ | 4.60 |
| 1879 | 3.31 | 调解前夜 仓促离婚为哪般？ | 4.60 |
| 1880 | 4.1 | 他老婆一走 就会娶我？（上） | 4.70 |
| 1888 | 4.9 | 大年三十 小夫妻为何被妈赶出门？ | 5.14 |
| 1889 | 4.10 | 因为我的病 继父就要与母亲离婚（上） | 5.54 |
| 1890 | 4.11 | 因为我的病 继父就要与母亲离婚（下） | 4.57 |
| 1891 | 4.12 | 最爱的人爱上了别人？ | 4.83 |
| 1892 | 4.13 | 老婆的女儿我搞不定？ | 4.02 |
| 1893 | 4.14 | 妻子被强暴之后 | 5.04 |
| 1894 | 4.15 | 爸爸为何险将我的眼打瞎？（上） | 5.18 |
| 1902 | 4.23 | 惨烈家暴妻子被打住院 丈夫身陷囹圄（上） | 5.93 |
| 1903 | 4.24 | 惨烈家暴妻子被打住院 丈夫身陷囹圄（下） | 5.66 |
| 1904 | 4.25 | 泼辣老婆为何逼得父母无家可归？ | 5.02 |
| 1905 | 4.26 | 丈夫难忘前女友 | 5.41 |

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|---|---|---|---|
| 1906 | 4.27 | 每月 500 元 刚够吃饭不许乱花！ | 4.40 |
| 1907 | 4.28 | 丈夫为何教唆 6 岁幼女去讨债？ | 4.85 |
| 1908 | 4.29 | “五一劳动节特别节目”买房卖房添烦恼（上） | 3.67 |
| 1916 | 5.7 | 儿子我要为你还几十万？ | 4.50 |
| 1917 | 5.8 | 我深爱的男人原来有老婆（上） | 6.69 |
| 1918 | 5.9 | 我深爱的男人原来有老婆（下） | 5.53 |
| 1919 | 5.10 | 还不了钱只能跳楼 | 4.37 |
| 1920 | 5.11 | 85 后小夫妻怀孕不久为何老公却要卖婚房？ | 4.07 |
| 1921 | 5.12 | 双胞胎姐妹花相煎何太急？ | 5.45 |
| 1922 | 5.13 | 妻子打丈夫 竟然打了 36 年？ | 4.32 |
| 1930 | 5.21 | 85 后小娇妻难忍硕士丈夫规矩多？（上） | 4.18 |
| 1931 | 5.22 | 85 后小娇妻难忍硕士丈夫规矩多？（下） | 5.54 |
| 1932 | 5.23 | 温柔洗脚妹婚后竟成“暴力狂”？（上） | 3.83 |
| 1933 | 5.24 | 温柔洗脚妹婚后竟成“暴力狂”？（下） | 5.16 |
| 1934 | 5.25 | 相好十年为何还不承认是我男友？ | 4.08 |
| 1935 | 5.26 | 与继母不合却逼继母与父亲复婚？ | 5.70 |
| 1936 | 5.27 | 好心做红娘为何还要被逼写检讨？（上） | 4.46 |
| 1944 | 6.4 | 新婚之夜婆婆为何冲入洞房？（下） | 4.36 |
| 1945 | 6.5 | “强势”公公遭遇“敏感”丈人夫妻两家闹翻天（上） | 6.01 |
| 1946 | 6.6 | “强势”公公遭遇“敏感”丈人夫妻两家闹翻天（下） | 5.35 |
| 1947 | 6.7 | 乖儿子结婚竟“逼疯”老母亲？ | 6.66 |
| 1948 | 6.8 | 泼辣儿媳为何不能容忍公公？ | 5.42 |
| 1949 | 6.9 | 小娇妻为何吃不饱饭还被丈夫赶走？ | 5.32 |
| 1950 | 6.10 | 妻子结婚时竟然就已怀孕孩子不是我的？ | 3.50 |
| 1958 | 6.18 | “千万富婆”为何有一把辛酸泪？ | 5.77 |
| 1959 | 6.19 | 85 后新娘离奇淹死谁才是“凶手”？（上） | 4.95 |
| 1960 | 6.20 | 85 后新娘离奇淹死谁才是“凶手”？（下） | 6.17 |
| 1961 | 6.21 | 老婆不在身边你就偷偷找女网友？ | 4.05 |
| 1962 | 6.22 | 洗脚妹抢走了我老公？ | 4.15 |
| 1963 | 6.23 | 丈夫笑里藏刀竟要把我逼疯？（上） | 5.79 |
| 1964 | 6.24 | 丈夫笑里藏刀竟要把我逼疯？（下） | 5.17 |
| 1972 | 7.2 | 儿子在棋牌室认识了离过婚的女人之后 | 4.47 |

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|---|---|---|---|
| 1973 | 7.3 | 妻子为啥扮“小三”丈夫竟然中了计（上） | 4.50 |
| 1974 | 7.4 | 妻子为啥扮“小三”丈夫竟然中了计（下） | 5.47 |
| 1975 | 7.5 | 妻子究竟为了什么神秘失踪？ | 4.98 |
| 1976 | 7.6 | 80 后小娇妻难忍 51 岁丈夫太严厉？ | 4.61 |
| 1977 | 7.7 | 大丈夫在家“买汰烧”为啥难讨女友欢心？ | 4.75 |
| 1978 | 7.8 | 老公签了一份神秘协议引发全家闹翻天（上） | 5.20 |
| 1986 | 7.16 | 老婆你心里到底藏着什么秘密？ | 4.46 |
| 1987 | 7.17 | 有妈为何成“孤儿”母亲连弃三子为哪般？（上） | 4.38 |
| 1988 | 7.18 | 有妈为何成“孤儿”母亲连弃三子为哪般？（下） | 4.39 |
| 1989 | 7.19 | 为何我要带着现妻找前妻？ | 5.39 |
| 1990 | 7.20 | 30 年夫妻离婚容易复婚难？ | 3.87 |
| 1991 | 7.21 | 85 后美丽小妈妈为何要放弃幸福生活？（上） | 4.69 |
| 1992 | 7.22 | 85 后美丽小妈妈为何要放弃幸福生活？（下） | 4.93 |
| 2000 | 7.30 | “美人”嫁给“英雄”后能收获幸福吗？（下） | 5.22 |
| 2001 | 7.31 | 大我 35 岁的丈夫有了私生子？ | 5.10 |
| 2002 | 8.1 | 丈夫的前妻为何指控我“第三者”插足？ | 5.42 |
| 2003 | 8.2 | 老公你再这么惯孩子我就“跳楼”（上） | 5.02 |
| 2004 | 8.3 | 老公你再这么惯孩子我就“跳楼”（下） | 3.48 |
| 2005 | 8.4 | 老公和弟媳到底有没有关系？（上） | 5.99 |
| 2006 | 8.5 | 老公和弟媳到底有没有关系？（下） | 5.17 |
| 2014 | 8.13 | 男友竟然曾经非礼我？ | 5.41 |
| 2015 | 8.14 | 迎娶 90 后女友为何这么难？ | 5.60 |
| 2016 | 8.15 | 重症监护室里的“植物人”父亲到底谁来管？（上） | 6.14 |
| 2017 | 8.16 | 重症监护室里的“植物人”父亲到底谁来管？（下） | 5.16 |
| 2018 | 8.17 | 我要搬回家 弟媳妇就打我？ | 4.95 |
| 2019 | 8.18 | 到底是研究生丈夫不顾家还是妻子想太多？ | 4.90 |
| 2020 | 8.19 | 19 岁小妈妈竟被生母推入“火坑”？（上） | 5.37 |
| 2028 | 8.27 | 80 后儿媳怒骂公婆只因对方管太多？（下） | 5.59 |
| 2029 | 8.28 | 卖房给爱人换肾爱人去世却要被继子赶走？（上） | 5.78 |
| 2030 | 8.29 | 卖房给爱人换肾爱人去世却要被继子赶走？（下） | 6.46 |
| 2031 | 8.30 | “抠门”老公让我实在无法忍受？ | 5.17 |
| 2032 | 8.31 | 这个女人是表妹还是情人？ | 3.49 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2033 | 9.1 | 90 后美女淘宝店主为何恋爱父母都反对？（上） | 4.74 |
| 2034 | 9.2 | 90 后美女淘宝店主为何恋爱父母都反对？（下） | 4.96 |
| 2042 | 9.10 | 88 年女孩嫁给“富二代”真的幸福吗？（上） | 4.51 |
| 2043 | 9.11 | 88 年女孩嫁给“富二代”真的幸福吗？（下） | 6.34 |
| 2044 | 9.12 | 老公为何要和比自己小 22 岁的“富婆”离婚？ | 5.15 |
| 2045 | 9.13 | 深爱老婆的男人为何也会移情别恋？ | 3.80 |
| 2046 | 9.14 | 前夫究竟为何阻止女儿结婚？（上） | 4.27 |
| 2047 | 9.14 | 前夫究竟为何阻止女儿结婚？（下） | 5.14 |
| 2048 | 9.15 | 老夫妻为何复婚一年又闹离婚？ | 4.26 |
| 2049 | 9.16 | 妻子一周五天住娘家究竟有何“阴谋”？ | 4.95 |
| 2057 | 9.24 | 女婿为何将岳父打得满头是血倒在地？ | 3.88 |
| 2058 | 9.25 | 父母为何不喜欢这个外来媳？ | 5.82 |
| 2059 | 9.26 | 丈夫的“神秘录音”把我逼出忧郁症 | 3.67 |
| 2060 | 9.27 | 儿子要玩游戏就把我赶出门？（上） | 4.59 |
| 2061 | 9.28 | 儿子要玩游戏就把我赶出门？（下） | 4.23 |
| 2062 | 9.29 | 公婆管太多日子怎么过？（上） | 5.39 |
| 2063 | 9.30 | 公婆管太多日子怎么过？（下） | 4.77 |
| 2071 | 10.8 | 爷爷为何“不待见”刚出生的小孙女？（下） | 6.53 |
| 2072 | 10.9 | 我已一无所有爱女竟“落井下石”？（上） | 5.94 |
| 2073 | 10.10 | 我已一无所有爱女竟“落井下石”？（下） | 4.21 |
| 2074 | 10.11 | 父亲为何只要女人不要儿子？（上） | 3.89 |
| 2075 | 10.12 | 父亲为何只要女人不要儿子？（下） | 5.60 |
| 2076 | 10.13 | 为何买瓶水还要被老公骂？ | 5.72 |
| 2077 | 10.14 | 老婆竟和别人“结婚”还发我喜帖？ | 4.90 |
| 2085 | 10.22 | 准丈母娘为何看不惯留洋硕士“毛脚女婿”？（上） | 5.25 |
| 2086 | 10.23 | 准丈母娘为何看不惯留洋硕士“毛脚女婿”？（下） | 4.23 |
| 2087 | 10.24 | 老父母被迫卖房逃命竟是女儿一手造成？（上） | 5.57 |
| 2088 | 10.25 | 老父母被迫卖房逃命竟是女儿一手造成？（下） | 5.57 |
| 2089 | 10.26 | 有爸有妈的孩子为何还要姑姑照顾？ | 5.13 |
| 2090 | 10.27 | 儿媳领了“离婚证”为何还没离婚？（上） | 6.07 |
| 2091 | 10.28 | 儿媳领了“离婚证”为何还没离婚？（下） | 5.19 |
| 2099 | 11.5 | 都是独生子女凭啥家务我多做？ | 5.30 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2100 | 11.6 | 得了经适房还问我要 50 万？ | 6.38 |
| 2101 | 11.7 | 80 后小夫妻离婚两年男方为何还死缠？ | 5.27 |
| 2102 | 11.8 | 老公为何一喝酒就拿我撒气？ | 5.22 |
| 2103 | 11.9 | 离婚夫妻为何纠缠不休？ | 4.19 |
| 2104 | 11.10 | 妻子竟然把丈夫逼到浴室里过夜？ | 4.96 |
| 2105 | 11.11 | 不称职的爸爸娶了新媳妇之后 | 4.71 |
| 2113 | 11.19 | 离婚夫妻为何不好聚好散非要同一屋檐下？（上） | 4.32 |
| 2114 | 11.20 | 离婚夫妻为何不好聚好散非要同一屋檐下？（下） | 5.24 |
| 2115 | 11.21 | 时髦外婆爱上视频聊天引发老伴满腹怨言？（上） | 4.87 |
| 2116 | 11.22 | 时髦外婆爱上视频聊天引发老伴满腹怨言？（下） | 4.27 |
| 2117 | 11.23 | 母亲真的是被儿子逼死的吗？ | 5.86 |
| 2118 | 11.24 | 你要男网友我就要前女友 | 6.58 |
| 2119 | 11.25 | 18 岁妙龄女友难道只爱我的钱？（上） | 4.59 |
| 2127 | 12.3 | 85 后小夫妻为何“冷战”已成家常便饭？（下） | 4.89 |
| 2128 | 12.4 | 这位 86 岁的离休老干部为何不能安享晚年？ | 5.72 |
| 2129 | 12.5 | 十多年的痛苦婚姻令顾家丈夫挥起拳头 | 4.65 |
| 2130 | 12.6 | 亲爸爸为何要毁我爱情赶我走？ | 5.39 |
| 2131 | 12.7 | 我还是不是你最深爱的“小白龙”？ | 5.23 |
| 2132 | 12.8 | 弟弟竟然“黑心”虐待八旬老父？（上） | 6.06 |
| 2133 | 12.9 | 弟弟竟然“黑心”虐待八旬老父？（下） | 5.01 |
| 2141 | 12.17 | 母亲身患重病女儿为何“见死不救”？（下） | 6.02 |
| 2142 | 12.18 | 小夫妻结婚半年竟从未同住亲家还大打出手？（上） | 4.75 |
| 2143 | 12.19 | 小夫妻结婚半年竟从未同住亲家还大打出手？（下） | 6.00 |
| 2144 | 12.20 | 忍无可忍离婚一个月为何还要给前夫一个机会？（上） | 5.33 |
| 2145 | 12.21 | 忍无可忍离婚一个月为何还要给前夫一个机会？（下） | 5.14 |
| 2146 | 12.22 | 大哥惹祸上身逼得我妻子要跳楼？（上） | 4.62 |
| 2147 | 12.23 | 大哥惹祸上身逼得我妻子要跳楼？（下） | 6.00 |

**Appendix 6 Questionnaire for online survey**

1. Please indicate your gender:
   1) Male
   2) Female
2. When were you born?
   Year 19___
3. What is the highest education that you have attained? If you are a student, please indicate the highest level you expect to complete
   1) No formal education
   2) primary school
   3) secondary school
   4) senior high school
   5) university or colleges
   6) master's degree and above
   7) other (please indicate)___
4. a. In which Province / Municipality / Autonomous Regions are you living now?_____
   b. And how long have you been living there? ____ year
5. What kind of hukou do you have?
   1) Urban Hukou
   2) Rural Hukou
6. In the last week, you have watched _____days TV.
7. Yesterday, how many hours did you spend watching TV? _____ hours
8. How often do you watch the following types of television programmes?

| | Always | Sometimes | Rarely | Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Fashion / Music / Arts / Celebrities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| b. Sport (e.g. sports news; sports competition) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| c. Reality television and talent shows | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| d. News / Information programme | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| e. Programme about people's life in society (e.g. XLNJ; Bang NvLang) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| f. Crime / Law (e.g. Jinri Shuo Fa/ Law today; Anjian Jujiao/Focus) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| g. TV Drama / Soap Opera | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

9. Have you heard of XLNJ television programme?
   1) Yes (continues to Q10)
   2) No (ends here)

10. Have you watched XLNJ before?
   1) Yes (continues to Q10a)
   2) No (continues to Q10b)

10a. if yes, how many times did you watch this programme in the last week? _____ times. (Continues to Q11.)

10b. if no, why do you not watch this programme? The following statements are some reasons; please indicate how much these reasons are like your own reasons for not watching XLNJ:

| | Very much like me | Like me | Some-what like me | A little like me | Not like me | Not at all like me |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Because I think it is staged and exaggerated. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| b. Because it is wasting time and I have better things to do. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| c. Because nobody I know watch this programme. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| d. Because it is not useful to me at all. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

11. Why do you watch XLNJ? The following statements are some reasons, please indicate how much these reasons are like your own reasons for watching XLNJ:

| | Very much like me | Like me | Some-what like me | A little like me | Not like me | Not at all like me |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Because it's interesting and it entertains me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| b. Because my family member or other people I know watch it, so I can discuss it with them. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| c. Because it's a habit, and I have nothing better to do. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| d. Because it shows how other people deal with the same problems I have, so I could learn about what could happen to me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

12. When you watch XLNJ, what parts are you interested in?

| | Very interested | Fairly interested | Not so interested | Not interested at all | | Do not know |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Causes or reasons of the disputes | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | 8 |
| b. The procedure of mediation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | 8 |
| c. Audience mediators' comments | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | 8 |
| d. Other parts (e.g. Bai wanqing harmony hotline; Guoliang zuizong. Etc.) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | 8 |

13. The following statements listed some different opinions towards this programme, please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with these statements:

| | Strongly agree | Somewhat agree | Somewhat disagree | Strongly disagree | Don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| e. Civil mediation is serious and should not be made into entertainment on TV. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| f. I think this programme helps resolve some people's family disputes. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| g. I will not choose mediation on TV myself, but it is fun to watching others' disputes. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| h. I think such mediation programme to some extent helps reduce the number of lawsuits. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| i. This programme evokes moral considerations in society, such as issues regarding the | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | respect for the elderly; loyalty in marriage, etc. | | | | | |
| j. | The audience mediators say what I want to say. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| k. | This mediation show tells people to be understanding and forgiving, which is a part of Chinese traditional virtue. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| l. | I think telling your family disputes on TV is losing face and damages the family reputation. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |

14. The following are some different types of disputes; will you be interested if these kinds of disputes are shown in the mediation programme?

| | | Not interesting at all | Not so interesting | Fairly interesting | Very interesting | | Do not know |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. | Neighbour disputes (e.g. Regarding the use of public places) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | 8 |
| b. | Disputes regarding the dividing and inheriting of house properties. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | 8 |
| c. | Disputes between | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | 8 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | residents living in aging buildings in old urban areas and local authority regarding relocation | | | | | |

15. Please indicate for each statements do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?

| | Strongly agree | somewhat agree | somewhat disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. If any conflict occurs, we should ask senior people to uphold justice. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| b. Even if parents' demands are unreasonable, children should still do what they ask. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| c. When a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law come into conflict, even if the mother-in-law is in the wrong, the husband should still persuade his wife to obey his mother. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| d. A person should not insist on his own opinion if people around him disagree. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| e. When interest groups operate and compete in a locale, they will damage everyone's interests. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| f. The state is like a big machine and the individual a small cog, and | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| thus should have no independent status. | | | | |
| g. People like me have no say in politics and government affairs. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| h. Government officials don't care too much about what people like me think. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| i. I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| j. I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| k. Politics and government are so complicated that I cannot really understand what is going on. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

16. Last month, did you hear anything through the 'grapevine' concerning economics, political affairs, or society?

1) Yes 2) No 8) Don't know

17. Do you talk about political issues and national affairs with other people?

| Often | Sometimes | Occasionally | Never | Don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |

18. How satisfied are you with the following aspects of Chinese society?

| | Not satisfied at all | Not so satisfied | Fairly satisfied | Very satisfied | Do not know |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. The economy (stable and high level of growth) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| b. Public safety | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| c. The social | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| welfare situation | | | | | |

19. Have you experienced mediation before?

1) Yes
2) No

19a. If yes, were you satisfied with the outcome of the most recent mediation?

| Very satisfied | Fairly satisfied | Not so satisfied | Not satisfied at all | Don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |

20. Ms. Wang, about 50 years old, is the second eldest in her family. Recently she has been caught up in a family dispute with her two siblings regarding the distribution of family properties and who should take care and support their 80-year-old mother. Their mum has a small flat in the old urban area where has been recently included in a relocation program. Thus their mum is expected to receive an amount of compensation, which is about 2 million RMB. Ms. Wang says that the one who is willing to take care of their old mum should get a little bit more of the heritage. But her younger sister insists that the heritage should be divided equally, while the elder brother says he should get more because he is the only son in the family. They have several arguments about this issue and the dispute is getting more and more serious.

20a. which action you would suggest Ms. Wang to take in the face of such dispute?

1) Mediation through People's mediation committee in your local community
2) Go to court, initiating a lawsuit
3) Petition
4) Protest
5) Other (please indicate_____)

20b. what is your reason for the above choice? (maximum 3 choices)

1) I trust in the court
2) They have higher authority

3) fairness of the court process
4) low costs of money
5) I trust in the mediator
6) effectiveness
7) good reputation
8) geographically closer
9) it takes less time, quicker
10) Other (please indicate____)

21. Mr. Zhang established labour relation with a branch stock exchange office Shanghai in 2000. On a working day in February last year, Mr. Zhang and two colleagues went to the manager's office reporting work progress. At that time, a client was in the office and refused to leave, claiming that has business to discuss with the manager. Zhang and his colleagues were in a hurry to see the manager and argued with the client. The dispute culminated in both parties throwing chairs to each other. Later that night, the client went to the hospital, claiming that he had a heart attack. The stock exchange office paid the client 50,000 RMB compensation for medical expenses, nutritional costs and other expenses.

Three months after this incident, the office dismissed Zhang for serious violations of principles and terminated labour contracts with the other two colleagues on an agreement. Mr. Zhang refused to accept this decision and appealed it to the higher authorities in the company, asking for an investigation. He said that the client appeared in the manager's office very frequently, which affect their normal work. The dispute started because he wanted the client to leave so he can do his work. He argued that the manager should take the main responsibility for this and asked for restore the labour relations. The branch office refused his appeal. Zhang then sent letters to every staff in the company and also report the case to the relevant district department. He believed that the stock exchange office illegally terminated the labour relationship and asked for an amount of 220,000 RMB compensation.

21a. which action you would suggest Mr. Zhang to take in the face of such dispute?

1) Mediation through People's mediation committee in your local community
2) Go to court, initiating a lawsuit

3) Petition
4) Protest
5) Other (please indicate_____)

21b. what is your reason for the above choice? (maximum 3 choices)

1) I trust in the court
2) They have higher authority
3) fairness of the court process
4) low costs of money
5) I trust in the mediator
6) effectiveness
7) good reputation
8) geographically closer
9) it takes less time, quicker
10) Other (please indicate____)

22. Are you?
1) a member of CPC
2) a Youth League member
3) a member of the United Front (minor parties)
4) common people

23. What is your current employment situation?
1) Employed
2) Self employed
3) Retired/pensioned
4) Housewife/househusband not otherwise employed
5) Student
6) Unemployed
7) Other (*write in*):_____

24. What is your current/before retired profession? _____

25. Are you working for the government or public institution, for private business or industry, or for a private non-profit organization? If you do not work currently, characterize your major work in the past.
1) Party/State Unit

2) State-owned enterprise
3) Private business or industry
4) joint venture/foreign
5) Private non-profit organization
6) None of above
7) Don't know

26. What is the average monthly income of your family?

1) under 2000 RMB
2) 2000-4999 RMB
3) 5000-7999 RMB
4) 8000-10999 RMB
5) 11000-13999 RMB
6) 14000 RMB and above
7) Not sure

## Appendix 7 Focus Group Question Guide

**Entertaining appeal and the show**

**The goals**

1. What is the entertaining appeal of the show (Participants' views on the entertainment provided by the show)
2. Participant's uses and gratifications of the show

**Qs asked in Focus Group**

1) As we know, the XLNJ aired at 6:30p.m. and there are other programmes broadcasted at this prime time period, such as news programme, why you choose to watch this mediation show over other programmes?
2) Is there any other programme you think is similar/comparable to the XLNJ show?
3) What label would you give to XLNJ show, for example news, entertainment, information, talk show, reality show, etc.?
4) There is one programme called XLNJ broadcasted on the Entertainment channel, have you watched this programme? and how often do you watch this show in a week?
5) In your leisure time, will you discuss with others about those cases that impressed you?

*For less-frequent viewers group:*

6) Can you talk about your impression of the XLNJ show? for example, what kind of show it is, and what is the target audience of the show, in your opinion?

**Social and political aspects**

**The goals**

3. Participants' opinions on dispute issues on the show
4. How do they perceive the aim of the show (while the audiences learn about legal and mediation knowledge from the show, whether do they consider it as a goal set by the programme makers)

5. Participants' views regarding the social and political influence of the mediation show

**Qs asked in Focus Group**

7) Since you might have watched a lot cases on XLNJ, in your memory, what kind of issues were often discussed on TV?
8) Do you think these kind of issues common in the real life in society?
9) Among the episodes you have watched, which one impressed you a lot?
10) What influence do you think that the televised mediation of conflicts will have in society?
11) Do you think whether the televised mediation can be a useful solution for family disputes?
12) What influence do you think that the televised mediation of conflicts will have in society?
13) In your neighborhood, what do you normally do when there is dispute?
14) In your opinion, why do people go on television for solutions?

**Cultural implications**

**The goals**

6. Attitude towards discussing personal issues on TV, i.e. face-saving/losing issues.
7. Whether participants find the show promoting traditional cultural values?

**Qs asked in Focus Group**

15) When you discuss with your friends or relatives, would you talk about the disputant go on TV?
16) What do you think about discussing family disputes on television? (losing face? Or acceptable?)
17) In your opinion, why do people go on television for solutions?
18) Do you think whether the televised mediation can be a useful solution for family disputes?

**Appendix 8 ANOVA Analysis for Watching Frequency of XLNJ between Education Groups**

| How many times watch XLNJ in a week | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Education Groups** | | College | Bachelor's Degree | Master's degree or above |
| | Mean | Mean Difference (S.E.) | Mean Difference (S.E.) | Mean Difference (S.E.) |
| Senior higher school and under | 4.98 | 0.977* (0.415) | 1.301*** （0.396） | 0.977 （0.725） |
| College | 4.00 | - - | 0.324 （0.362） | 0.000 （0.707） |
| Bachelor's Degree | 3.68 | - - | - - | -0.324 （0.695） |
| Master's degree or above | 4.00 | - - | - - | - - |

Tukey HSD

Note: N=185, *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

**Appendix 9 ANOVA Analysis for Watching Frequency of XLNJ between Income Groups**

| How many times watch XLNJ in a week | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Income Groups** | | ¥2,000-¥4,999 | ¥5,000-¥7,999 | ¥8,000 and above |
| | Mean | Mean Difference (S.E.) | Mean Difference (S.E.) | Mean Difference (S.E.) |
| Lower than ¥2,000 | 5.42 | 1,119<br>(0.642) | 1.763**<br>(0.666) | 1.676*<br>(0.721) |
| ¥2,000-¥4,999 | 4.30 | -<br>- | 0.644<br>(0.557) | 0.557<br>(0.460) |
| ¥5,000-¥7,999 | 3.65 | -<br>- | -<br>- | -0.087<br>(0.493) |
| ¥8,000 and above | 3.74 | -<br>- | -<br>- | -<br>- |

Tukey HSD

Note: N=175; *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

**Appendix 10 Correlations between Political Efficacy, Political Interest, and Satisfaction with Society**

| Pearson Correlations | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Variables** | External Political Efficacy | Internal Political Efficacy | Satisfication with society | Political Interest |
| External Political Efficacy | 1 | 0.156* | 0.097 | 0.132* |
| Internal Political Efficacy | - | 1 | -0.011 | 0.324*** |
| Satisfication with society | - | - | 1 | -0.239*** |
| Political Interest | - | - | - | 1 |

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

**Appendix 11 ANOVA Analysis for U&G between Income Groups**

| Uses and Gratifications between Income Groups | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| U&Gs | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Entertainment | Between Groups | 1.181 | 3 | .394 | .186 | .906 |
| | Within Groups | 362.796 | 171 | 2.122 | | |
| | Total | 363.977 | 174 | | | |
| Social utility | Between Groups | 2.369 | 3 | .790 | .396 | .756 |
| | Within Groups | 340.751 | 171 | 1.993 | | |
| | Total | 343.120 | 174 | | | |
| Pass time | Between Groups | .369 | 3 | .123 | .060 | .981 |
| | Within Groups | 353.345 | 171 | 2.066 | | |
| | Total | 353.714 | 174 | | | |
| Information seeking | Between Groups | 4.460 | 3 | 1.487 | .681 | .565 |
| | Within Groups | 373.334 | 171 | 2.183 | | |
| | Total | 377.794 | 174 | | | |
| Perceived closeness | Between Groups | 1.692 | 3 | .564 | .305 | .821 |
| | Within Groups | 315.657 | 171 | 1.846 | | |
| | Total | 317.349 | 174 | | | |

**Appendix 12 ANOVA Analysis for U&G between Education Groups**

| Uses and Gratifications between Education Groups | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| U&Gs | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Entertainment | Between Groups | 12.414 | 3 | 4.138 | 1.983 | .118 |
| | Within Groups | 377.727 | 181 | 2.087 | | |
| | Total | 390.141 | 184 | | | |
| Social utility | Between Groups | 5.590 | 3 | 1.863 | .921 | .432 |
| | Within Groups | 366.388 | 181 | 2.024 | | |
| | Total | 371.978 | 184 | | | |
| Pass time | Between Groups | 3.953 | 3 | 1.318 | .637 | .592 |
| | Within Groups | 374.295 | 181 | 2.068 | | |
| | Total | 378.249 | 184 | | | |
| Information seeking | Between Groups | 32.262 | 3 | 10.754 | 5.086 | .002 |
| | Within Groups | 382.690 | 181 | 2.114 | | |
| | Total | 414.951 | 184 | | | |
| Perceived closeness | Between Groups | 8.623 | 3 | 2.874 | 1.522 | .210 |
| | Within Groups | 341.777 | 181 | 1.888 | | |
| | Total | 350.400 | 184 | | | |

**Appendix 13 ANOVA Analysis for U&G between Age Groups**

| Uses and Gratifications between Age Groups | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| U&Gs | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Entertainment | Between Groups | 2.109 | 4 | .527 | .245 | .913 |
| | Within Groups | 388.031 | 180 | 2.156 | | |
| | Total | 390.141 | 184 | | | |
| Social utility | Between Groups | 7.747 | 4 | 1.937 | .957 | .432 |
| | Within Groups | 364.231 | 180 | 2.024 | | |
| | Total | 371.978 | 184 | | | |
| Pass time | Between Groups | 22.918 | 4 | 5.730 | 2.902 | .023 |
| | Within Groups | 355.330 | 180 | 1.974 | | |
| | Total | 378.249 | 184 | | | |
| Information seeking | Between Groups | 14.585 | 4 | 3.646 | 1.639 | .166 |
| | Within Groups | 400.366 | 180 | 2.224 | | |
| | Total | 414.951 | 184 | | | |
| Perceived closeness | Between Groups | 16.236 | 4 | 4.059 | 2.186 | .072 |
| | Within Groups | 334.164 | 180 | 1.856 | | |
| | Total | 350.400 | 184 | | | |

**Appendix 14 Description of Focus Group Participants**

| Number | Surname* | Gender | Age | Education level |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Zhang | Male | 33 | Master |
| 2 | Huang | Male | 31 | Bachelor |
| 3 | Yang | Male | 37 | Bachelor |
| 4 | Li | Female | 27 | Bachelor |
| 5 | Kong | Female | 58 | Bachelor |
| 6 | Cheng | Female | 23 | Bachelor |
| 7 | Zhao | Male | 53 | Senior High School |
| 8 | Xiong | Male | 38 | College |
| 9 | Tang | Male | 31 | Vocational School |
| 10 | Luo | Female | 20 | College |
| 11 | Liu | Female | 69 | Junior high School |
| 12 | Sun | Female | 30 | Vocational School |
| 13 | Yang | Male | 53 | Bachelor |
| 14 | Mi | Male | 46 | Bachelor |
| 15 | Shi | Male | 28 | Master |
| 16 | Liu | Female | 33 | Bachelor |
| 17 | Du | Female | 42 | Bachelor |
| 18 | Yang | Female | 61 | Master |
| 19 | Zhang | Male | 49 | Senior High School |
| 20 | Luo | Male | 26 | College |
| 21 | Cai | Male | 50 | Senior High School |
| 22 | Huang | Female | 28 | Vocational School |
| 23 | Zhao | Female | 23 | Vocational School |
| 24 | Ji | Female | 25 | College |

**Note:**

* Pseudonyms are provided here to protect the confidentialiy and anonymity of participants.

#1-#6 participants, conducted on Saturday, 28 sept. 2013, frequent-viewers (higher education)

#7-#12 participants, conducted on Saturday, 28 sept. 2013, frequent-viewers (lower education)

#13-#18 participants, conducted on Sunday , 29 sept. 2013, non-frequent-viewers (higher education)

#19-#24 participants, conducted on Sunday , 29 sept. 2013, non-frequent-viewers (lower education)

# Summary

Since 2008, with the market opened up for privatisation and commercialisation, mediation TV-shows have been highly popular on Chinese television. These shows respond to the then Hu-Wen government's demands for establishing and maintaining a "harmonious society", but also integrating the audience's interests and needs in learning about others' life and obtaining information about it. The combination of traditional Confucian mediation and television entertainment gives rise to latent tensions in three respects: Firstly, these programmes blur the boundary between politics and popular culture by incorporating entertainment elements with a supposedly serious mediation process. Secondly, it seems paradoxical for these shows to promote harmony while their content focuses on family disputes and conflicts which reflect the consequences of social and political changes following economic reforms. And thirdly, publicizing private issues on television is contrary to the nation's traditional Confucianism culture of "saving face". The mediation show seems not consistent with traditional values people were taught.

This study focuses on the production and consumption of *New Elder Uncle (Xin Lao Niang Jiu, XLNJ)* – the first mediation show that collaborates with Shanghai Justice Bureau and broadcasts on Entertainment Channel - exploring answers to questions raised from the mentioned entertainization, social and political, and cultural issues. Findings suggest that the media are more independent economically, but not politically. The marketization of the television industry and the broad political environment forces them to produce contents that must satisfy both the needs of the market and of the authorities. Mediation, in this study, turns out to be the key to pleasing both parties, used as a delicate combination of education, control, propaganda and entertainment. The show's viewers (respondents from surveys and focus groups we conducted) obtain enjoyment from the dramatic storyline and at the same time they are aware of the "harmonious" image the show aims to build. It does not seem difficult for the audience to deal with the cultural contention as they distinguish moral face from social face, and they enjoy the show as long as the 'face' issue does not concern themselves. The results also suggest that the

political goal in an entertainment format is both acceptable and can be convincing to the audience as a source of useful information.

By comparing programme production with audience perceptions, this research contributes to the scholarly discussion on political communication in China and other Communist authoritarian regimes as well as the effects of entertainization of media for politics.

The mediation show in this study provides a prism through which to understand the subtle relation between the media and the authoritarian state in the course of economic reforms. After more than three decades, the government perceived social discontent stemming from the consequences of economic reforms. The then Hu-Wen administration turned to the Confucian ideas of equality and balance for possible solutions. Their decision to 'build a harmonious society' implied that there are 'unharmonious' problems associated with marketisation and rapid economic growth. Building and maintaining social stability is partly an effort for the then Hu-Wen government to preserve Communist rule in China (Zhu, 2008), but also pivotal to the realization of Xi Jinping's 'China Dream'.

Meanwhile, the marketisation with Chinese characteristics does not change the ownership of television, which runs the risk of creating a dilemma between responsibility on the one hand and freedom on the other (Yin 2008). The proliferation of entertainment reality programmes is a consequence of the severe competition in the television market. Entertainment-oriented content is both politically safe and economically lucrative, which might be the logic behind the vibrant growth of these shows. However, at the same time the propaganda authorities were apparently concerned about the tendency of vulgar and 'excessive entertainisation' (Bai 2015). More importantly, they expect the media to render social inequalities invisible rather than amplify them and to educate rather than deteriorate moral values. The relation between the media and the state seems to be reciprocal at this point, because the latter seems to be satisfied with the media's role and considers it a helpful tool in strengthening a picture of harmonious society and responsive government.

This study also adds a modest contribution to the existing literature on entertainment and politics in China, and life-counselling programmes in particular. Life-counselling shows like *XLNJ* manage to serve the twin masters of the party-state and the market: they pay attention to social issues and people's grievances, but at the same time confine topics to a non-sensitive range and as such responding to the government's

social governance campaign. These programmes defuse social conflicts by providing viewers with an impression that most problems and issues can be solved. Packaging their political intent in the format of entertainment, life-counselling shows like *XLNJ* provide advice on a wide range of 'life issues'; from professionals or experts such as mediators, lawyers or psychologists, which can be arguably convincing for certain groups of viewers. As seen by the audience these programmes are not likely to have a hidden agenda beyond transmitting technical, scientific, objective and practical knowledge (Sun and Zhao 2009, Sun 2014, 2015).

Compared with studies on media entertainment and politics in Western democracies where entertainment such as soft news is blamed for the portrayal of malaise that creates a constant ambience of public mistrust, this study suggests that this media malaise theory, developed in the liberal democracies, might not be automatically applicable to authoritarian states like China, where the situation seems to be the opposite: politics or information packaged in an entertainment format is more likely to be acceptable and seen as positive. This is partly because news in the government-run media is prone to censorship and thus have a notorious credibility problem (Shirk 2011). In a transition period towards marketisation with Chinese characteristics, the Party still attempts to maintain strict control, which gradually pushes the media towards the direction of entertainisation, as entertainment programmes will be less censored (Li 2014a). The infotainment format like life-counselling programmes in a sense may be more informative than a news programme. They provide people with advice and create knowledge relevant to an individual's life, and as such echo earlier studies in Western Europe (see Brants 1998, Brants and Neijens 1998).

# Samenvatting (Dutch Summary)

Sinds 2008, met de markt opengesteld voor privatisering en commercialisering, is de Chinese televisiemarkt aan hevige concurrentie onderhevig waarbij vooral entertainment reality-programma's zeer populair zijn geworden. Mediation shows, waarin *live* bemiddeld wordt tussen personen met conflicten, zijn daar een sprekend voorbeeld van. Deze shows spelen zowel een politieke als een sociale rol: ze voldoen aan de eisen van de toenmalige Hu-Wen-regering om een "harmonieuze samenleving" te bevorderen en te onderhouden, maar ook aan het doel het publiek te informeren en te leren over het leven van anderen en daarmee de belangen en behoeften van het publiek te integreren. De vermarkting-met-Chinese-trekken laat het staatseigendom van tv-kanalen echter onverlet en loopt daarmee het risico een dilemma te creëren tussen verantwoordelijkheid en vrijheid (Yin 2008).

Tegelijkertijd geeft de combinatie van traditionele confucianistische bemiddeling en televisie-entertainment aanleiding tot latente spanningen op drie punten. Ten eerste vervagen deze programma's de grens tussen politiek en populaire cultuur door een serieus bemiddelingsproces te mengen met entertainment-elementen. Ten tweede tenderen de shows naar een paradox tussen harmonie en conflict: ze pretenderen het eerste te bevorderen door op het tweede te focusen, met familiegeschillen en conflicten die vaak het gevolg zijn van sociale en politieke veranderingen na de economische hervormingen. Ten derde lijkt het openbaar communiceren van privé-problemen op de televisie in strijd met de traditionele confucianistische cultuur van 'saving face', geen gezichtsverlies lijden. De mediation show lijkt niet in overeenstemming met de traditionele waarden die worden onderwezen, te meer als het op een populariserende manier gebeurt.

Dit onderzoek richt zich op de productie en consumptie van New Elder Uncle (Xin Lao Niang Jiu, *XLNJ*), een mediation show geproduceerd door een entertainmentkanaal in samenwerking met het Shanghai Justitice Bureau. Het richt zich in het bijzonder op de potentiële spanningen rond de genoemde entertainisering, sociale, politieke en culturele kwesties. Ingebed in theorieën over politiek, media en entertainment, en de *uses and gratifications* die mensen uit media halen, maakt het onderzoek gebruik van

interviews en documentenanalyse (voor de productiekant) en een gebruikerssurvey en focus groepen (voor de consumptiekant). De analyse leidt tot het volgende beeld.

In de eerste plaats suggereren de resultaten dat de media economisch meer onafhankelijk zijn, maar politiek minder. Enerzijds bieden de autoriteiten ruimte, maar anderzijds, als ze bezorgd zijn over vulgaire en 'excessive entertainisation' (Bai 2015), dan is een enkel signaal genoeg om een en ander aan te passen. De logica achter de levendige groei van deze shows lijkt te verklaren uit het feit dat entertainment-gerichte inhoud zowel economisch lucratief als politiek relatief veilig is. De vermarkting van de televisie-industrie en het veranderende politieke klimaat dwingt hen om inhoudelijk te laveren tussen de behoeften van publiek en markt en de eisen van de overheid. Mediation blijkt de sleutel tot het behagen van beide partijen, in een fijngevoelige combinatie van educatie, controle, propaganda en entertainment.

In de tweede plaats suggereren de resultaten ook dat het entertainment format het politieke doel niet in de weg staat: de show's producenten hebben geen probleem met de focus op harmonie, ook in de keuze van issues, en het publiek herkent en waardeert de aantrekkelijkheid van het format en de educatieve functie. Een tegenstelling tussen harmonie en conflict wordt niet herkend, genegeerd of ontkend. De verwachting van de autoriteiten is dat de media sociale ongelijkheden eerder onzichtbaar maken dan ze te vergroten. Op dit punt lijken media en de autoriteiten een wederzijds belang te hebben; de laatsten zijn tevreden met de manier waarop de eersten bijdragen aan het beeld van een harmonieuze samenleving en een responsieve overheid. Voor het publiek is het entertainment format niet alleen acceptabel, maar zij zien het ook als een nuttige informatiebron.

In de derde plaats genieten kijkers naar de show van de dramatische verhaallijn, terwijl zij zich tegelijkertijd bewust zijn van en instemmen met het "harmonieuze" beeld dat de show propageert. Het publiek lijkt geen moeite te hebben met de culturele tegenstelling die gezichtsverlies potentieel oproept, omdat het een onderscheid maakt tussen een moreel en een sociaal gezicht. Ze beleven plezier aan de show zolang het gezichtsverlies niet henzelf betreft

Door de productie van programma's te vergelijken met publiekspercepties, draagt dit onderzoek bij aan de onderbouwing van de wetenschappelijke discussie over politieke communicatie in China en andere communistische autoritaire regimes, als mede aan de studie naar de politieke effecten van vermarkting en entertainisering van de media. Het

rijkt een prisma aan, waardoor de subtiele relatie tussen media en autoritaire staat in een periode van sociale onvrede zijn te begrijpen. Voor mogelijke oplossing van de spanningen wendde de toenmalige Hu-Wen-regering zich tot de confucianistische ideeën van gelijkheid en evenwicht. Hun beslissing om te bouwen aan een 'harmonieuze samenleving' veronderstelt 'onharmonieuze' problemen die het gevolg zijn van vermarkting en snelle economische groei. Dit opbouwen en onderhouden van sociale stabiliteit was deels een poging van de Hu-Wen-regering om het communistische bewind in China te verstevigen (Zhu 2008), zoals het ook van cruciaal belang is voor de verwezenlijking van Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Droom'.

Deze studie levert ook een bescheiden bijdrage aan de bestaande literatuur over entertainment en politiek in China, en over service-programma's zoals mediation shows in het bijzonder. Shows als XLNJ slagen er in om de twee meesters van partij/staat en markt te dienen: zij besteden aandacht aan sociale kwesties en grieven van de mensen, maar tegelijkertijd beperken zij onderwerpen tot niet-gevoelige zaken. Als zodanig beantwoorden zij aan de *governance* campagne van de regering. Deze programma's maken sociale conflicten onschadelijk door kijkers de indruk te geven dat de meeste problemen op te lossen zijn. Door hun politieke bedoelingen in het format van entertainment te verpakken en door gebruik te maken van professionals als mediators, advocaten en psychologen die met overtuiging bepaalde publieksgroepen kunnen aanspreken, slagen service-shows als XLNJ er in advies te geven over een breed scala aan 'levensvragen'. Voor het publiek kennen deze programma's geen verborgen agenda naast het overdragen van objectieve, wetenschappelijke en praktische kennis (Zon en Zhao 2009; Zon 2014, 2015).

In studies over media-entertainment en politiek in westerse liberale democratieën worden entertainment en 'soft' nieuws vaak verantwoordelijk gehouden voor de 'over-verbeelding' van narigheid en een daaruit voortvloeiende sfeer van publiek wantrouwen. Deze studie suggereert dat deze *media malaise* theorie niet automatisch toepasbaar is op autoritaire staten zoals China. De situatie lijkt hier eerder het tegenovergestelde: politiek of informatie verpakt in een entertainment-format is waarschijnlijk meer aanvaardbaar en wordt als positief gezien door zowel publiek als autoriteiten. Dit komt deels doordat nieuws in de door de regering gecontroleerde media gevoelig is voor censuur en dus een geloofwaardigheidsprobleem heeft (Shirk 2011). In een overgangsperiode naar vermarkting-met-Chinese-trekken probeert de partij nog

steeds strikte controle uit te oefenen, wat de media in de richting van *entertainisation* dwingt; dat soort programma's kent minder censuur (Li 2014a). Daarmee kan het infotainment format in zekere zin informatiever zijn dan het nieuws-format: ze geven relevant advies en creëren nuttige kennis, die wordt gebruikt en gewaardeerd. Deze resultaten sluiten daarbij aan bij wat in eerdere studies in West-Europa is gevonden (zie Brants 1998; Brants en Neijens 1998).

# Curriculum Vitae

Zheng Li was born on November 17, 1983 in Shanghai, China, and attended secondary school at Shanghai Jianping High School. She obtained her bachelor degree in Media Studies-Television Production at University of Westminster in 2007. In 2008, she received an MSc in Media and Communications from London School of Economics and Political Science. Starting from November 2009, she was registered as a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Political Science of Leiden University, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Kees Brants and Dr. Daniela Stockmann. Between 2014 and 2016, she worked as a research assistant on an ERC-funded project with Dr. Daniela Stockmann.