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

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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 zhiyi 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 China²⁹⁸, 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 bureaux²⁹⁹. 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 knowledge³⁰⁰. 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 entertained 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 *bukou* 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 ‘*shiyè danwei, qiyè búa guānlǐ*’, 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 studies³⁰⁴ (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 (*minsèng*) 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 vulgarisation (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.