Chapter 2: Mass Media and Reality TV Formats in Post-socialist China

This chapter provides a study of what is happening in the contemporary Chinese media landscape. As media are "socially, economically and politically organized apparatuses" (Hall, 1977, p. 343), it is almost impossible to analyze Chinese reality TV without any consideration of the changing sociocultural context of China and the continuously shifting political ideology of the Communist Party of China (CPC), regardless of whether they exert influence directly or indirectly. Therefore, this chapter first discusses the general historical and social backgrounds of China's reform and transformation, then examines two main themes that closely relate to the prevalence of reality TV in China and the creation of the show *X-Change* in particular: the urban-rural dichotomy and the propagandistic, market-driven Chinese media system. In this context, the production of *X-Change* and its adjustment of affective strategies can be seen as negotiating the tension between economic pressure, political regulation, and cultural values. But the negotiation between these forces is not always balanced, which also leads to ambiguity and unpredictability in emotional articulation. My purpose in this chapter is not to conduct a comprehensive review; rather, I intend to trace some of the most significant trends at play in the popular media fields, in order to set the analytical contexts for the case analysis of *X-Change* later in this book.

2.1 Chinese economic reform and social transformation

2.1.1 Economic reform and the introduction of neoliberalism

Since the late 1970s when the CPC carried out the market reforms of the so-called "reform and opening-up" policy, Chinese society has experienced

unprecedented changes, which has transformed it from a socialist-planned economy to a largely authoritarian-capitalist society, and from state socialism to "socialism with Chinese characteristics".[1] Some Chinese studies scholars have applied a series of terms attached to the prefix "post", such as "post-Mao", "post-socialist", "post-reform" and "post-broadcast" to emphasize the profound impacts of reform and opening-up on various fields of Chinese society, economy, politics, ideology and culture (e.g. Dirlik, 1989; Zhang, 2008). At the beginning, economic reform may well have been an independent decision by Chinese leadership – led by Deng Xiaoping – to face the dual difficulties of political uncertainty and years of stagnation under the socialist regime of planned economy. However, while the economy has experienced dramatic progression with the implementation of a set of practices of neoliberalism[2], including the de-collectivization of agriculture, the opening up of the country to foreign investment, the privatization and contracting out of many state-owned enterprises (SOEs), Chinese society has also gradually transformed in the process of market economy formation. In place of families, communities, schools and other social groups, business enterprises and the corresponding productive organizations have become the main agents of reproduction mechanisms in China (Meisner, 1999). In a sense, China's reform cannot be considered as merely an economic event, more importantly, it has profoundly subsumed entire socio-economic, political and cultural mechanisms into the market trajectory. David Harvey (2005) emphasizes that Chinese political economy in the era of reform "increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control", and calls it "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" (p. 120).

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1 "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" is a broad theoretical system representing the combination of Marxism with the specific reality of China, first proposed by Deng Xiaoping in 1982 and then gradually expanded to include Three Represents (Jiang Zemin), Scientific Outlook on Development (Hu Jintao), and Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. For details, see the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/19thcpc/baogao.htm.

2 In the past decade, neoliberalism has become increasingly dominant around the world. In this book, I understand neoliberalism not "as a universal arrangement", nor is it merely the economic policies of market deregulation, liberalization, privatization, and globalization; rather, I view it "as a mobile set of calculative practices" (Ong & Zhang, 2008, p. 9). What is special about neoliberalism is its flexibility and compatibility that can articulate diverse political environments in a contingent manner.

It is barely possible for contemporary Chinese people not to feel the changes (and sometimes even sudden reversals of fortune) in their lives induced by this rapid economic reform. If in the Mao era the Party-state determined what proper life should be, leaving little room for individuals to make their own decisions, reform and opening-up have unlocked the realm of free development where people are now encouraged to pursue personal glory and grasp life with both hands (Zhang & Ong, 2008). Especially after the reform and restructuring of SOEs in the late 1980s, Chinese citizens are no longer identified as either a "workplace person" (*danwei ren* 单位人) or "institutionalized person" (*zhidu ren* 制度人) whose work and life is organized by the public sector, but as a "social person" (*shehui ren* 社会人) who is forced to find new jobs in the competitive capitalist employment market (Sun, 2015, p. 17). As Deng Xiaoping's famous "cat theory" – "It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white; as long as it catches mice, it's a good cat" – has shown, as long as the market economy can develop productivity, it can be used in the practice of socialist countries. By appealing to "powers of freedom" (Rose, 1999), the CPC have actively transformed Chinese citizens from collective subjects into neoliberal subjects who are dedicated to self-responsibility, entrepreneurship, self-improvement, and self-governance.

To make these transformations effective in practice but controlled, the Party-state deliberately defined its ideological framework. During economic reform, de-politicized terms such as "market economy", "modernization", "reformation", and "scientific development" are applied to replace terms like capitalism, privatization, and deregulation, etc. – terms like that might "cause immediate public backlash in a society that is still officially socialist and emotionally sympathetic to socialism" (Wu & Yun, 2016, p. 194). Indeed, as the communist party who publicly claims to represent Chinese workers and farmers, CPC is afraid of being charged with critiques of "capitalist restoration" (Petras, 1988).

However, despite the cautious rhetoric of political propaganda, it is difficult to neglect the rapid neoliberalism-oriented transformation of Chinese society, including the sweeping marketization of production, privatization of public institutions, and commercialization of everyday life. Moreover, as China actively sought to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the 1990s, its legal framework and institutional arrangements were drastically changed to adapt to the requirements of WTO in order to integrate into the global capitalist system. This move further indicates that the official has largely embraced neoliberalism and market fundamentalism. No wonder

Alvin So (2007) purports that "up to the early 2000s, the Chinese state had been faithfully carrying out the policies of neoliberalism in its globalization drive" (p. 62).

2.1.2 "Socialism from afar"

Despite these developments, China has never officially and openly pronounced itself to be a neoliberal state; some may even find it counterintuitive to describe China as neoliberal. Politically, China has maintained a one-party socialist dictatorship. The neoliberal principles of private accumulation and self-interest are not allowed to touch key areas that are still firmly controlled by the Party-state (Ong & Zhang, 2008). The hallmark of neoliberal structure in terms of strong institutions, rule of law, and transparent markets are largely missing. Most importantly, despite decades of spectacular capitalist growth, Chinese market economy reform from its inception has been a top-down execution process – a national practice – during which state permission to pursue self-interest (mainly in retail and manufacturing sectors) is aligned with socialist controls over designated areas of collective or state interest. Thus, ostensibly, there exist developments in both China's economic policies and its cultural landscape that parallel the Western neoliberal turn. Yet it would be a mistake to simply equate the Chinese state with neoliberal market authoritarian states elsewhere in the world (Zhao, 2008).

Thus when looked at carefully, China has taken a fairly idiosyncratic route in which state power is not disabled but reanimated with the infusion of neoliberal ideas. Specifically, as identified by Aihwa Ong (2006), the "Chinese model" or "Chinese state capitalism" actually deploys the twin modalities of neoliberal governmentality – "neoliberalism as exception" and "exceptions to neoliberalism" (p. 3). While "neoliberalism as exception" is deployed by the state to manage and subject certain populations, spaces, and socio-economic domains to neoliberal norms and market calculations; "exceptions to neoliberalism" are also invoked in policies, in order to exclude certain populations and regions from the benefits of capitalist development. Then what we have witnessed as a whole, is "China's selective embrace of neoliberal logic as a strategic calculation for creating self-governing subjects who will enrich and strengthen Chinese authoritarian rule" (Ong & Zhang, 2008, p. 10). Zhao explains that this is, in essence, "a kind of State opportunism" (2015, p. 15) embedded in the deep structure of Chinese culture.

At the same time, the CPC has adopted a series of institutionalized measures, including the normalization of the replacement of high-rise authorities, allowances for controlling mass political participation, and the adjustment of ideological guidance, etc. While these changes, which are referred to as the "authoritarian resilience" by Nathan (2003), may be heavily restricted and even sometimes contradictory, it is through their implementation that the Party-state has successfully sustained political legitimacy and adapted to the ever-changing international and domestic environments. With institutional adjustment, the Party-state has voluntarily transformed itself from the past coercive "commander" to the current "guider" and a more or less efficient service provider (Chen, 2007), yet it should be noted that it is more a pragmatic strategy premised on market growth within the orbit of the state. Throughout the process of economic reform, state authorities continue to regulate from a distance, and the monopoly of political power held by the CPC remains intact (Lee, 2014). This pattern, which Zhang and Ong (2008) call "socialism from afar" (p. 3), is formed by the combination of neoliberal practices and the remote regulation by state authorities. Thus, unlike the assumption that market forces will cause substantial transformation of the political system, the CPC has tactically re-oriented the basis for its political legitimacy from ideological indoctrination in the tenets of Communism to practical purposes of "delivering the goods" and raising people's living standards.

Admittedly, economic reform in the past 40 years has successfully increased the country's material wealth and improved its international status. China has turned from a poor socialist country into the second largest economy in the world. The Chinese model of social transformation, coined the "Beijing Consensus" (Ramo, 2004), denotes a different development path from the Washington Consensus, which is dominated by free-trade neoliberal dogma. While some scholars highly praise China's economic accomplishment under this model, the reform process is not entirely smooth and uninterrupted. Rather, accompanying the rapid progress of economic development, urbanization and technological innovation, significant signs of disruption in the social fabric, decline in civic virtue, and intensified social problems with regard to the deepening wealth gap, unequal resource distribution, and class stratification have emerged (Sun & Guo, 2013). The Chinese sociologist Sun Liping (2004) called contemporary China a "fractured society". With the deepening of economic reform, pre-modern, modern and post-modern phenomena and their components coexist but are deeply differentiated and interdependent, and hence fail to form an organically integrated society.

Among these emerging social issues, some sociological and social psychological scholars have noticed the (negative) impacts of rapid market transformation on spiritual value, social relations, and social mentality. For example, Sun and Wang (2010) find that unlike the old generations who tend to follow traditional collective ideology, the young generations in China are more likely to regard self-development as the most important thing in life. Sun and Ryder (2016) also argue for the rising individualism accompanied by China's rapid economic growth. As traditional social relations are dispersed, post-reform Chinese society has rapidly moved from a society of acquaintances to a society of strangers (Jiao, 2015), which may further elicit negative emotions such as anxiety, loneliness, depression, resentment, or other potential psychological problems, especially for migrant workers and the elderly (cf. Xiao, 2014; Cheng, 2009; Li & Li, 2007; Yan et al., 2014). Therefore, the impacts have happened not just on economic, political, and legal systems, but also indicate a confrontational but also cooperative process between new social forces and the original forces. Both are trying to sculpt the daily life of Chinese people, striving for positive cognitive evaluation, emotional investment and commitments to action. Informed by the above studies, my analysis pays particular attention to the entanglement and transformation between neoliberal practices, the construction of identity, and the emotional norms of Chinese society; these lay the framework for the actualization of affects in contemporary China.

2.2 The urban-rural dual structure

One of the concentrated manifestations of social fracture is the urban-rural dichotomy formed as the result of the Chinese government's eager pursuit of the transition from traditional agricultural economy to modern industrial economy after the foundation of the PRC in 1949. The issue of an urban-rural dichotomy is particularly presented here for it constitutes the direct social background for the creation of the reality show *X-Change* – the exchange of roles and lives between urban and rural youths. In general, the status quo of China's urban-rural duality does not happen naturally, but is the result of structural inequality (cf. Yang, 1999; Yang & Cai, 2000; Wen, 2005; Cho, 2013). In the planned economy period (1950s to 60s), the urban-rural dual structure was established by the government through implementing a set of coercive "exploitative" policies and systems, primarily including the system of

people's communes, the dual urban-rural household registration system, and state monopoly on purchase and marketing. From 1953 onwards (until 1985), the state monopoly of the purchase and marketing system required farmers to sell surplus grain to the state in accordance with the state's prescribed grain types, purchase prices, and planned purchase distribution figures. The state would then provide planned supply to urban workers; private traders were prohibited and food markets were cancelled.

In 1958, the household registration system (*hukou* 户口), which is the basic institution for documenting population information and distributing public resources, was established in order to create a clear distinction between rural and urban areas. It gives urban citizens birthright to the benefits of the social welfare system, including not only basic necessities like food and clothes supply, but also employment, housing, education, labor insurance, medical care, pension, employment, etc. On the contrary, in rural *hukou* it is difficult to enjoy high levels of social security and public services. Correspondingly, the population flow between urban and rural areas is strictly restricted. The people's commune system was introduced in the same year, requiring farmers to conduct collective production under the unified command and organization of production teams, production brigades, and people's communes. So understood, the flourishing Chinese urban economy was achieved on the basis of the exploitation of agriculture, villages, and peasants. This structural inequality, as Wang Hui points out, "quickly transformed itself into disparities in income among different classes, social strata, and regions, leading rapidly to social polarization" (cited in Harvey, 2005, p. 142–143).

In the aftermath of economic reform, obstacles to population mobility were gradually eliminated, causing "the laborer tide" (*mingong chao* 民工潮) – an unprecedented growth in the number of migrant workers (*nongmin gong* 农民工) who originally registered in rural areas but now migrating out of the countryside in search of work in the cities (especially in the southeastern coastal cities). However, migration to the cities would not guarantee them stable employment, incomes, and welfare, and their residence in the city is still firmly controlled. As a consequence, the urban-rural dual structure has not been swayed but has broken through geographical restrictions to reproduce within the city. With low incomes and unstable employment, a large number of migrant workers have to live in "villages within cities" (*chengzhong cun* 城中村), and their children, whom they cannot afford to house and educate in cities, are left behind in villages. Therefore, while cities take advantage of national preferential reform policies and their own strength to get rich

rapidly, the urban-rural gap keeps on expanding, and has undoubtedly hindered China from building a well-off society and achieving modernization.

The opportunity for a change in CPC's attitude towards rural issues occurred in 2000, when an open letter to former Premier Zhu Rongji and the book *I spoke the truth to the Premier* were published by Li Changping, a former rural cadre from Hubei province, in which he claimed that "the peasants' lot is really bitter, the countryside is really poor, and agriculture is in crisis". Catalyzed by this event, public attention began to focus on the serious "three rural problems" (*san nong wenti* 三农问题) of "agriculture, rural society and the peasantry", and heightened pressure from public opinion was placed on state leadership to find effective countermeasures. At the 16th National Congress of the CPC in 2002, the state put forward a new strategic mode of balancing urban and rural economic and social development. The next year, at the 16th Central Committee of the CPC, concrete reform policies were discussed intensively, and the single-minded pursuit of GDP growth was replaced by comprehensive development strategies that gave top priority to equal development in all regions. Later these thoughts were further clarified as the "scientific concept of development". From 2004 to 2022, nineteen consecutive "No. 1 Central Documents" were issued by the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council, all of which have been designed to emphasize the "top priority" of solving "three rural problems" of Chinese modernization.

In 2006, the state abolished agriculture taxes and launched a major new program for the construction of a new socialist countryside (*jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun* 建设社会主义新农村). The aim was to make use of state investment to alleviate severe rural problems, and to enable the rural population to also enjoy the benefits of modernization (He, 2007). In 2008, on the Third Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee of the CPC, the state claimed that they realized "'three rural problems' are the root of many social contradictions and problems, and also the 'bottleneck' in future reform and development" (Xinhua, 2008). The *Decision on Several Big Issues on Promoting the Reform and Development of Rural Areas* was passed in this session, which powerfully accelerated agricultural growth and rural development. More recent efforts include the opinions on strategy for rural revitalization implemented by the State Council in 2018, which aims at deepening rural reform, and promoting agricultural modernization and new rural construction (Xinhua, 2018).

In line with such a strategic transformation, the beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed a shift from a period of urban bias within govern-

mental strategy to one characterized by "industry nurturing agriculture and cities supporting countryside", and the "harmonious economic development" of both urban and rural areas (Li & Hu, 2015). As a consequence, the urban-rural dual structure still exists yet has been gradually transformed. The discriminatory benefits of residence, employment and social insurance included in urban *hukou* have partly been eliminated, by contrast, rural *hukou* has entailed increasing social welfare benefits, including new rural cooperative medical insurance and new rural social endowment insurance, as well as benefits in terms of decency and dignity. Industrialization and urbanization no longer rely on sucking the countryside dry, instead, rural areas have obtained resources transferred from urban areas. With the implementation of agricultural subsidy policies and the promulgation of regulations restricting the expansion of industrial and commercial capital into the countryside, the interests of farmers have also begun to be protected.

However, the longstanding and solidified urban-rural injustice and the consequent intense social contradictions cannot be erased easily or in the short term. Social reform may benefit Chinese farmers by increasing their senses of subjectivity, competition, and openness; as Xing (2008) claimed, Chinese farmers are gradually moving towards modernity in social psychology. But it is difficult to ignore the pain and suffering of rural people in the process of class and status changes. For example, although migrant peasant workers want to integrate into the city, the reality is often that they are marginalized and excluded at all levels of economy, societies, and culture (Liu, 2001; Lu, 2007). Today, rural citizens and rural areas are suffering not just from material deprivation, but also cultural impoverishment. According to the Chinese sociologist He Xuefeng (2020), now the main problem in the current countryside is not low income or heavy labor, but the imbalance of social relations, and the collapse of traditional value systems and cultural identity. These impacts of Chinese rural issues on individual psyches, patterns of relations, and social emotions are also reflected on different levels in the reality TV show *X-Change*, a phenomenon which I will detail in a more specific analysis in the following empirical chapters.

2.3 Reform of the Chinese media system: between market and state

In order to fully understand the emergence of reality TV in China and the broadcasting of *X-Change*, it is necessary to investigate the Chinese media system and the discursive space within which both are embedded. Since the 1980s, China's mass media system (and the whole cultural system) has also undergone an unprecedented transformation by extensive commercialization. Prior to the initiation of Dengist economic reforms, like many industries in China, the media business was state-subsidized and Party-controlled. As a legacy of communist rule, the Chinese television industry was structured as an integrated part of the state's political system. Programming was didactic and propaganda laden, and displayed a "surprising uniformity" that comprised mostly serials and news broadcasts (Harrison, 2002, p. 176). Without allowing any commercial activities, including advertising, the functions of media under a centrally planned economic system were limited to providing guidance, propaganda, and education, and the only judgment criteria for media was its social effect. 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" (cited in Lu, 1979, p. 45).

2.3.1 Marketization and transformation of the Chinese television industry

While there is no doubt that the Party-state continues to exert influence on the overall content of media, other forces, especially the market, come into play. At the 11th National Radio and Television Work Conference in 1983, in accordance with the state policy to promote a socialist market economy, the authorities proposed two guidelines. One was to transform the traditional "Two-level" television system (central, provincial) to the "Four-level" television system (central, provincial, city and country), with one station often broadcasting on more than one channel. The other guideline was the new industry development policy of "opening up new financial sources, increasing economic benefits" (cited in Zhang & Zhang, 2019). Facilitated by this move, governments at different levels all invested in television station buildings, and this led to a

proliferation of local radio and television stations.[3] Correspondingly, a variety of new television forms and genres were created to fill up airtime. However, it inevitably caused a huge waste of resources; large amounts of repetitive building, production, broadcasting and coverage among television stations at each level consequently resulted in repetitive investments and increasing costs (Yang & Wang, 2019).

After Deng Xiaoping's southern speech tour in 1992, the business forces that had started to accumulate in the 1980s quickly gathered into a tide that swept Chinese society. Accordingly, China's cultural and media policy firmly turned toward total marketization. Cultural institutions were defined as part of the "third industry of services", and cultural products were considered as commodities. In 1998, the Chinese government decided to gradually loosen their monopolistic control, and terminated subsidies for local and provincial broadcasters. This new policy did not imply that the previous role of serving as the mouthpiece and ideological instrument of the authorities was obsolete, but it did urge television stations to commodify their products and become responsible for their financial self-sufficiency. Subsequently, a series of financial and management reform measures were implemented to alleviate economic pressures and improve consumer choice, including the introduction of advertising as the chief financial resource of media revenue, the adoption of Western management practices and thinking, the restructuring and establishment of broadcasting conglomerates, the listing of parts of non-production business on the stock market, which were then made partly open to private and foreign capital after entering the WTO, etc (cf. Sun, 2010; Hong, 2014).

During these processes, China's once state-subsidized organs of propaganda have been forced to become financially independent, and transformed from "command mouthpieces" to advertisement-based and profit-driven media enterprises that increasingly cater to consumers and niche markets

3 By the end of 2007, there were 263 radio stations and 287 television stations in China, an increase of 2.83 times and 8.97 times respectively over 1978 (Sina, 2008). To this day, this policy is still continuing and in effect. According to the latest data released by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), as of the end of 2017, there were 2,106 county-level radio and television broadcasting organizations nationwide, and a total of 503 radio and television broadcasting organizations at the city level and above (SAPPRFT, 2018a; 2018b).

(Zhao, 1998; Sun, 2012). Correspondingly, the structure of the Chinese television system has also changed profoundly; different TV stations have different daily practices and varying degrees of freedom to pursue commercial interests (Wang, 2019). Since the mid-1990s, although the only central television network in China – CCTV, remains the market leader, provincial TV stations such as Hunan TV, Zhejiang TV, and Jiangsu TV have been among the fastest growing players, especially since they were permitted to launch satellite channels (*shengji weishi* 省级卫视) in 1998 and vie for a share of the market. As competition for advertising intensified, many entertainment channels were established, and mass entertainment programs skyrocketed as their economic potential to attract a large proportion of audience was scouted.[4] While in the pre-reform era, the ideal mode of socialist *wenyi* (文艺, literature and art) was to cultivate new socialist subjects and guide them towards the great cause of "serving the *masses*"[5] and constructing a communistic society; in the reform era, the discourse of commercialized and mass entertainment tends to interpellate *audiences* and encourage them to invest in personal consumption in the capital economy.

Entertainment trends since the 1990s have paved the way for the introduction of global reality formats. In 2004, Hunan satellite TV (HSTV), also the producer of *X-Change,* officially launched the slogan "Happy China" and committed to "[creating] China's most dynamic TV entertainment brand", making it the first domestic TV station to clearly position and build its own brand (Tongxiang, 2017). When HSTV scored astounding popularity and commercial success with *Super Girl* (Chaoji nüsheng 超级女声) – a talent show for young women based on the British *Pop Idol* format – in 2005, it gradually established its status as the "leader of entertainment" (Lei, 2019). Soon, new entertainment formats began to flood into China's television industry, strengthened by China's further integration into the international media market; this trend developed well into the new century.

4 To be sure, entertainment is not a novel thing in China, yet what could be considered as television entertainment before the 1990s, such as artistic performances, music programs, spoken dramas, and operas, were not known as "entertainment" (*yule* 娱乐, i.e., amuse and delight), but as literally "literature and art" (*wenyi* 文艺), which implied their status as a kind of high art embodying a socialist-oriented mission to enhance the public's aesthetic taste.

5 This phrase is taken from Mao's "double serve principle" – "Literature and art serve (proletarian) politics and the masses", proposed at the symposium on literature and art in May 1942 (cited in Guangming, 2012).

In order to compete for the limited attention of the audience, it is not surprising that the producers made a conscious effort to learn from media experiences of the western television industry that was valorized as more "advanced" and "professional" in the production of entertainment programs. With the success of *Super Girl*, HSTV has obtained the wealth code of "interactivity" by imitating western reality formats. The cornerstone of this interactivity is to turn a passive audience into a "participatory audience" (Jenkins, 2006b) through vote-in mechanisms and fan engagement. Allowing the audiences to participate in the show as both contestants and judges, reality TV has established a "parasocial relationship" (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and "a positive, personal, relatively deep, emotional connection" (Duffett, 2013, p. 2) between the audience and the protagonists.

In the new millennium, the exponential growth of the Internet and other new media technologies has allowed more convenient ways for the audience to be emotionally engaged and socially networked. Although telecommunication infrastructure is still largely state-owned in China, Internet service and content providers are largely comprised of private enterprises who usually treat communication as nothing more than publicity and marketing, which released more space for television to try new economic models. One such model is the "idol-centered business model" (Yang, 2009), which further enables Chinese television producers to extract affective capital by incorporating converging technologies into the structure of the program.

To sum up, since media system reform, the Chinese media has entered a "pan-entertainment" era (cf. Zhou & Liu, 2011; Li, 2013). Unlike the "mouthpieces" of earlier communist regimes, current television stations are driven by the competitive market and unyieldingly pursue higher viewer ratings, which demands that audiences are continually entertained. Some television stations have decided to transform themselves into "entertainment vendors" (Bai, 2005), turning other non-entertainment television genres such as news programs and public service programs into entertainment. Global reality formats are introduced to cater to ever-changing needs, in turn, they also affect the production model of Chinese television, from program genres and media content, to macro market structure and ideas of television governance. Inevitably, the production of *X-Change* reflects the move of media marketization in some ways. For example, its narrative structure has been able to go beyond the documentary tradition of Chinese TV, and become increasingly align with "Western" reality shows. More analysis on this will be offered in

Chapters 6 and 7. Next, I will focus on another key factor influencing Chinese media: political authority.

2.3.2 State control and ideological reconstruction

While with the introduction of market- and audience-oriented mechanisms, Chinese television stations have gained more autonomy in nonpolitical and entertainment content, as well as more independence in their daily operations and management, the nature of Chinese media as the state apparatus that is owned by the propaganda departments of CPC remains unchanged. According to Pan and Chan (2000), media reform has resulted in what can be called the "market-based party organ model" (p. 256). In this model, Chinese media is defined as both a political superstructure and an information industry – as compromised entities that are "cause-oriented enterprises (*shiye* 事业) in nature, but managed as profit-oriented businesses (*qiye* 企业)" (Li & Dai, 2008) – and is required not only to serve ideological propaganda goals but also to reproduce itself through profit-making activities. Thus, Chinese television stations need to serve two masters, the Party and the market, "to strike a balance between ideological mission and profitability" (Pan & Chan, 2000, p. 256).

The unique aspect of China's media reform is that state control predominates; throughout the process of media system reform, it was the cultural policy of the state that encouraged television stations to compete for advertising revenue and respond to audience desires. As Zhao (2004) states,

> rather than creating a new institutional structure, market relations have been adopted and contained by the existing Party-controlled media structure. Thus, the market-oriented transformation of the Chinese news media occurred within the orbit of the Party-state. (p. 189).

Investigating cultural governance policy and actions, it is not difficult to find that the regulation of mass media under the control of rigid political principles has been normalized as a long-term activity of the CPC. In the 1990s, adhering to the thought of "catching with two hands" (*liangshouzhua* 两手抓) – "pushing for material advancement on one hand and cultural and ethical progress on the other, grasp with two hands and both hands should be powerful" – the Party-state set out to reassert media control and upgrade its ruling technologies (cited in Yang, 2011). This act fortified the state's entire propaganda apparatus and elevated ideological and political works within the party

leadership (Zhao, 2008, p. 22). In practice, Chinese media is consistently defined as the state ideological apparatus and is required to follow the course of the Party-state unconditionally. In February 2016, Xi delivered a speech on the Party's news and public opinion work symposium, once again clarifying the ambition to strengthen the party's supervision of the media (Zeng, 2016). "Sticking to the Party spirit" (*dangxing yuanze* 党性原则)" has become the first rule of the media transformation: media must fulfill political missions allocated by the central and municipal governments before they could seek to make profits from various commercial activities, or perform other functions such as overseeing social phenomena and providing mass entertainment products.

To maintain the ideological function of television within the Party's propaganda work, both punitive and defensive measures have been applied. Since 2002, a series of directives has been issued to curb entertainment. To ensure that the rules are followed, specialized departments, represented by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), was created to control and censor television content. Thus, no matter how softened, secular or even cynical media content becomes because of the influence of the market, media and all other symbolic interactive approaches, such as education and art, are always subject to rigid political control by the Party-state through institutional, political, and financial means. Another significant way to guarantee the state's authority and dominance is through limiting private or foreign capital in key ideological areas (Bai, 2007).

Apart from these active interventions, the propaganda department also exercise passive control in the form of self-censorship – meaning that media organizations often feel an invisible space of control and are trying to evade political minefields with creative activities (Lu, 2003; Rui, 2009). They regularly adopt proactive or positive propaganda strategies, for instance, facing excessive entertainment, the Party-state re-advocated the notion of television as "public service" and appealed to Chinese traditional and socialist values in constructing a harmonious socialist society. In the Party's words, the core values of media propaganda are "unity", "stability", "encouragement" and "positive publicity", and it is media's responsibility "to arm Chinese people with scientific theories; to guide Chinese people with correct public opinion; to develop Chinese people with noble spirit; and to encourage Chinese people with outstanding product" (Jiang, 1994).

As a result, political control is tightly maintained, leaving only sporadic occasions on which media workers can cross official ideological boundaries.

Luo (2015) proposed that the Party-state is simultaneously the owner, funder, regulator and censor of the media system (p. 54). It is unrealistic to assume that the Party-state is incapable of resisting the trend of neoliberalization and globalization, or let the values of liberalism, freedom, democracy and so forth drive straight in. More likely, the commercialization of television is not an antagonistic force but a supportive force that helps the Party-state tame the market with political superiority in order to satisfy popular needs for diverse cultural products, and more importantly, to justify ideological legitimacy and accumulate capital for their own sake (cf. Lee, 1990; Zhao, 2008).

However, it is necessary to point out that political control is not as top-down, one-sided, and unsurmountable as in the collectivist economic era. In fact, the party seems primarily concerned with the overt compliance of the media, and less whether they internalize the party's ideological requirements in their daily operations, which makes it difficult to guarantee a specific effect. The National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA)[6], one of the highest decision-making institutions with regards to Chinese media, is the administrative department authorized by the State Council to promulgate constructive or guiding regulations, such as notices, documentaries, and prohibitions. However, these regulations do not have legal effects. They are hysteretic reactions targeting specific problems, rather than dealing with underlying structural formations in a predictable, systematic, and far-sighted manner. This reactive nature of the NRTA's regulations leaves television producers much space to operate freely. Strictly speaking, the NRTA is more like a political broker who mediates contradictions and competitions between different interest groups, in order to achieve a balance or stability acceptable to all parties to the extent possible.

2.3.3 The "disjunctive media order"

Overall, the Chinese television industry has experienced a substantial marketization from the mid-1990s. The proliferation of television stations, growing commercialization, the gradual erosion of public service broadcasting, the introduction of digital services, the fragmentation of audiences: all played their

6 The predecessor of NRTA is the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, 2013-2018), and before that, the Chinese television and radio industries is governed by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT, 1998–2013).

part in transforming the media landscape we once knew. A new era was ushered in where television stations have turned into a multi-way system that reconciles market rules with political supervision. Bai (2014) proposes to view such a complex and dynamic media landscape as a "disjunctive media order" in post-socialist China:

> Disjuncture describes an order of things that are simultaneously disconnected and interrelated, and a disjunctive media order is one in which the development of media is driven by more than one logic. To be sure, most media systems in the world are shaped by a variety of political, economic, social, and professional forces. But what makes disjuncture a dominant feature of the Chinese media is the coexistence and interpenetration of two equally powerful forces, neither of which dominates or collapses into the other: the political and the economic. (p. 13).

The two dominant forces of state control and market imperatives are shaping China's media ecology in a complex and sometimes contradictory way. When these two forces align, television producers have to try their best to satisfy their restless desires, but when they conflict, producers must seek a cautious balance to avoid offending either. In a similar sense, Lee, He, and Huang (2007) proposed that in China's media landscape, the state and capital are not external to each other but inherently intertwined, forming a relationship pattern that can be called authoritarian "party-market corporatism". Indeed, the market works as a strong power to force the unyielding pursuit of ever higher viewer ratings, which has led to an entertainment storm since the 1990s. More and more market- and audience-oriented programming, including reality shows have been produced, making television entertainment a primary site for capital accumulation. However, contrary to the conception that light entertainment programming is politically less sensitive and hence less likely to be disciplined by the Party-state (than news and informational content), Chinese mass media as a whole, is excessively subject to the control of party leadership and maintains its role as an ideological vehicle to promote a "harmonious society" and a "happy China".

With regards to the introduction of Western reality TV shows, while the Chinese government hopes to activate the local TV industry through the introduction of global reality formats; they are simultaneously also vigilant against the penetration of Western ideology embedded in the formats, and aim to prevent them from undermining socialist ideology like Trojan horses. To this end, they strengthened the management of model programs through circuitous

supervisory and administrative measures, and used local adaptation as an important means to maintain party ideology. Thus, the traditional propaganda mission of the media has not been abolished in the process of commercialization. Political consciousness and the coupling effect of politics and capital have prompted TV producers to use special narrative strategies to achieve high program ratings while maintaining the correct political orientation.

The complex role that Chinese media play in the dynamic relations between political frameworks and commercial imperatives requires a more nuanced examination. If the Chinese media outlet is *X-Change*, a reality show with decades of broadcasting history and produced by a provincial television station – HSTV, how do the various social forces I have discussed work in articulation and rearticulation with the emotional performances in *X-Change*? What happened in the dynamic tension between these forces along with the historical revision of *X-Change* and what kind of mediascape does it provide in the entanglements of political, economic, cultural and affective negotiations? Chapter 6, Chapter 7, and Chapter 8 of my book work in tandem to answer these questions. In the following chapter, I will first clarify my theoretical frameworks.