

Digital Media, Governance, and the Making of Youth in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Drawing on the idea of governance through the media, this chapter examines the way in which reality shows in contemporary China have imbued Chinese youth with a social consciousness conducive to the state pursuit of industrial modernity. Using the popular reality TV programme *Produce 101* as a case study, it investigates the appropriation of neoliberal principles in maintaining an equilibrium between personal and social responsibility - a balance that lies at the heart of discourse around the China Dream. It argues that reality talent shows in China function within a larger framework of governance that surreptitiously appropriates the neoliberal logic of autonomy and meritocracy, and repackages these ideals into a tool for advancing the welfare of the collective. As such, these media spectacles function as a modern bard that confirms shared values, cultural assumptions and socioeconomic aspirations of the nation. Ultimately, these shows reveal how governance in China largely rejects the traditional neoliberal assumption that the free market is capable of maximising social good, and instead co-opts neoliberalism's language of individualism in a way that marries personal aspirations with those of the nation.

Introduction

Since modernity first dawned on Chinese soil in the late nineteenth century, China has been confronted with three fundamental challenges – state-building, nation-building and people-making. In state-building, China has sought to transform its age-old empire into a modern republic; though in practice, its institutional structures have evolved along traditional ideals of bureaucratic control rather than Western tenets of democracy. In nation-building, its

diverse population has been subsumed into a single multi-ethnic nation embedded in the alien concept of the Westphalian nation-state, with its inherent tension between ethnicity and nationhood. In people-making, however, the journey has proven to be more complex and varied, encompassing the cultivation of a new collective consciousness for a unified political community under the new nation-state. Different objectives of the state have produced different demands for ‘ideal characteristics’ its people ought to have.

The process of people-making can be divided into three phases. The first began with Liang Qichao’s (1873-1927) ‘new people’ campaign in the late Qing era. Launched by Liang’s *Xinmin Shuo* (新民说 On New People, 1902-06) – a series of twenty articles published in *xinmin congbao* (新民丛报, 1902-1905) – the campaign aimed to transform what Liang (2013) called *bumin* (部民 clan people) into modern *guomin* (国民 nation people) to prepare the traditional peasantry who had long lived under dynastic rule for a modern nation-state (Cao, 2018). The process of constructing the new *guomin* continued into the Republic Period (1911-1949), but ended with the incumbent Guomintang (国民党 the Nationalist Party) retreating to Taiwan. Beginning in tandem with the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, the second phase focused on creating the class-based category of *renmin* (人民 people). This concept was founded on the ideological divide between the proletarian ‘people’ and their ‘class enemies’ for an orthodox socialist state. However, starting from the post reform era in 1978, the third phase has renounced its relation to Marxist class identity and returned instead to the previous and more inclusive concept of a ‘nation people.’ Grounded in post-reform aims of economic development, the process of people-making has sought to imbue in the younger generation collective aspirations for national revival, prosperity and pre-eminence. Industrialist modernity, as prized by late Qing elites, has returned to the forefront of political thought in the contemporary age, and serves as a fundamental goal that defines the desired qualities of the nation’s people. Unlike *guomin*- and *renmin*-making, the new national subjectivity has taken a more personal form – it has incorporated the individual as a legitimate focus of development. Rather than focusing solely on nation-state and class interests, individual hopes have become increasingly prioritised in national campaigns that nevertheless link these seemingly self-centred desires to collective aspirations and national missions.

Drawing on the idea of governance through the media (Peters, 2019; Palmer, 2003) in contemporary society, this chapter examines how digital media has imbued Chinese youth with a social consciousness conducive to the state objective of industrial modernity. Using

the online reality TV show *Produce 101* (创造 101, hereafter *101*) as a case study, it investigates the appropriation of neoliberal forms of governance by the state project of the ‘China Dream (中国梦)’. Central to this study is the concept of people-making through digital media as a technology of social regulation. Key questions examined in this study include: How do social values centered around self-advancement and autonomy work in conjunction with state campaigns that aim to build a strong and prosperous nation? What are the ideal qualities that Chinese youth should have in the new neoliberal economic order, as circulated by digital media? And most importantly, how do the media work in conjunction with the state to promote the values of the China Dream campaign in a way that adroitly reconciles neoliberal individualism with socialist collectivism?

In addition to answering these questions, this chapter also explores the civic values embedded in *101* and how the program trains viewers to become model individuals who will survive and succeed in China’s socialist market economy, constructing a narrative that weaves individual successes into a greater dream of national prosperity. In other words, we investigate how competition-based reality TV shows construct a narrative in which personal desires are embedded into a group-oriented context, and how this narrative mirrors the China Dream by recasting national prosperity as a function of individual fulfilment. By inculcating values of self-reliance and self-sacrifice within its viewers, the show constructs ‘templates for citizenship that complement the privatization of public life’ (Ouellette 2004:224) while also emphasising the importance of social responsibility in pursuing individual aims. Ultimately, the program trains both its contestants and viewers to embody civic values of self-reliance and social cooperation in their roles as drivers of the Chinese Dream – those who are able to take responsibility for both themselves and society at large.

The chapter is divided into five sections. Section one conceptualises the study within the framework of soft governance through digital media. Section two discusses key questions of how moral and civic values are constructed and circulated through competition-based reality shows like *101*. Section three turns to the didactic side of *101*, exploring how the show recasts collective aspirations as personal desires through critiquing contestants’ moral conduct. Section four draws parallels between the show’s cardinal narrative and the rhetoric of the China Dream campaign, highlighting how group identity is constructed through the aggregation of individual traumas and aspirations. Section five concludes the chapter by summarising key socio-political functions of model individuals that *101* reveals, and relates this new form of people-making to China’s historic search for a viable route to modernity.

Digital media as technology of governance

In an age of media-saturation, the media has exerted a significant impact on the state's capacity to govern and the style in which governance is delivered. As a result, societal governance has had to adapt its style to the fast-changing media environment within which it functions. The media have thus become an essential component of social governance as Peters (2019:13) argues. The primary function of governance is to steer society through collective choice by constructing a common purpose (Pierre and Peters, 2000). As media increasingly penetrate every facet of society, the implementation of a government agenda relies not only on conventional channels of political communication, but soft channels of mass communication, including entertainment or 'infotainment' programmes. Directing desired information to target audiences through such soft channels proved not only to be cost-effective, but more efficient as a means of communication between state and people. The use of 'nudges' and psychology-based instruments to disperse preferred messages to the public has become essential for governance in the age of digital media (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). The advance in information communication technology (ICT) has therefore altered the lives of people, and the way their lives are run with significant consequences that have yet to be fully understood.

Governing through the media has always been a key feature of China since the 1949 revolution. Mass media in socialist China fulfils first and foremost a political function in shaping the society to a radically different direction from its nationalist (1911-49) and imperial (pre-1911) past. Since the late 1970s however, a two-tier media system has emerged and become fully institutionalised in the post-reform era, comprised of the state-media and non-state media. The former serves primarily as a propaganda tool, as it has been historically, to promulgate the political messages of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and disseminate its policies. The latter has been incorporated into the liberalised marketplace in its operation as a business enterprise, yet nevertheless operates strictly within the orbit of the party-state. It fulfils both political and socio-economic functions with its increasing penetration into the social sphere. With rapid advancements in ICT and the restructuring of the media industry, commercialised media have experienced exponential growth in the age of digital media. By March 2020, the number of China's netizens had climbed to 904 million. Broadband coverage has reached 99% even in the least-wealthiest of rural regions. Over 99% of netizens access the Internet through smart phones (CNNIC, 2020). The online digital world has replaced traditional television channels as the primary space for mass media users to gather,

observe, and interact. Digital media has also changed the fundamental nature of mass communication. The audience, once passive patrons, are now in more control than ever over the objects of their consumption. Cast in a more proactive light as ‘consumers’ in the capitalist marketplace, they have become an indispensable link in the economic (re)production cycle. Nonetheless, the commercialised media function as what Fiske and Hartley (1978) call ‘the bardic function’ in society. That is, media work as a social ritual in which culture communicates with the collective self. The media ‘bard’ monitors and actively shapes society by controlling the messages they convey to the public. The bardic function ensures the media serve to contribute to the reproduction of sociocultural values, institutions and practices. In the rapidly shifting socio-economic landscape of post-reform China, the bardic non-state media function more effectively than the ‘mouthpiece’ of state media in articulating established values, ideologies and priorities of the state. They form a cornerstone of the process of cultivating younger generations in becoming productive individuals who serve both individual and state interests amidst increasingly diversified youth culture and lifestyles.

More specifically, four of the seven bardic functions Fiske and Hartley (1978:66-67) summarize are relevant to examining functions of digital media in contemporary China:

‘To articulate the main lines of the established cultural consensus about the nature of reality. . . To implicate the individual members of the culture into its dominant value-systems by exchanging a status-enhancing message for the endorsement of the message’s underlying ideology. . . To convince the audience that their status and identity as individuals is guaranteed by the culture as a whole. . . To transmit by these means a sense of cultural membership.’

Since China’s reform four decades ago, the market has played a pivotal role in establishing China’s status as an economic powerhouse in the global order, and achieving a *xiaokang* or ‘moderately prosperous’ society in which the basic needs of all of its people are met. This market-centred governance has necessitated a bottom-up approach in which the state is tasked not with an explicit governance, but rather the creation of what Rose (1990:6) calls ‘the enterprising individual’, who knows how ‘to calculate for their own advantage’, ‘accept risks in the pursuit of goals’ and constantly strives for personal ‘fulfilment, excellence, and achievement’. These new social expectations reflect neoliberal principles of market primacy, seemingly contradictory when juxtaposed against the collectivist principles of Chinese socialism. Yet it is precisely such contradictions that have defined the Chinese model of economic development, which brought about unprecedented levels of economic growth and

lifted over 850 million people out of poverty (The World Bank, n.d.). As the largest political-economic experiment in the world, China has defied key Western economic principles by combining the iron fist of the state with a carefully managed market economy. Neoliberalism has played a pivotal role in unleashing social and entrepreneurial capabilities in contemporary China, albeit within the subtly intimidated state orbit.

What is of particular interest is how the government has amalgamated such ideals of individual fulfilment into a collective narrative of national prosperity and revival. As Evan Osnos (2013) observes, the state has ‘sought to inspire its people by raising the flag of the China Dream’ both as a national aspiration and an aggregation of the individual dreams of over a billion people. As constructed in *101*, collective success is conditional upon individual triumphs and the self-realisation of each contestant. In championing market-founded ideals such as prosperity, mobility, and dedication to one’s craft, the state has shifted the responsibility of regulating individual conduct from the government to the individual. Discipline, dedication, and cooperation are no longer top-down mandates as they once were in such schemes as the ‘Down to the Countryside Movement’ that sought to rectify bourgeois thought patterns of youth, but rather cast as the individuals’ own ‘desire to achieve optimum happiness and success’ (Ouelette 2004:225) in the socialist marketplace. These market forces have brought with them presumptions of free will that recast the individual as the author of their own fortunes and misfortunes. Such a discourse convinces people that failure to thrive in a neoliberal economy has little to do with structural deficiencies and everything to do with one’s personal inability to self-govern. Most importantly however, at its core, ‘such lifestyle maximisation entails a relation to authority in the very moment as it pronounces itself the outcome of free choice’ (Rose, 1996:59). Ultimately, one must acknowledge that the proliferation of individual freedom is not so much a bestowing of civic rights, as it is an alternative and effective channel for the state to realise national aims.

Reality shows, Palmer (2003:1) argues, have shifted the focus from informing the audience about issues in society, to shaping human behaviour itself. As such, the media function to inform how individuals conduct ourselves in various social situations. The implicit recommendations constitute a soft regulation of social conduct to achieve the ‘normalisation’ of behaviour – the hallmark of modern capitalist society. The bardic media have become a crucial part of managing and normalising personal conduct. At its core, governance is concerned with the regulation of human conduct, both as a regime of self-management and in relation to interacting with other members of society. In commercialized digital media, the bardic role is subtle and more effective than the didactic, stern-faced state

media in shaping people's behaviour towards desired ends. As the state remains invisible, the absence of explicit didacticism gives individuals a sense of ostensible autonomy, overlooking the fact that they are prompted to behave in ways desirable to state priorities. Moreover, as Meng (2009:258) argues, reality TV has subverted 'the hierarchy between celebrities and average Joes' by drastically lowering barriers to entry in the entertainment industry. Digital media have given traditional viewers the opportunity to interact with and even become the stars they once unidirectionally revered, bringing celebrities and audiences closer than ever before. The 'celebrification of average folk', as Ouelette & Murray (2004:11) call it, 'complicates the contours of television fame and the way that its star personas have been constructed.' As a result, the increasingly participatory nature of reality TV shows has further augmented viewers' sense of freedom, autonomy and power.

***Produce 101* as cultivation of collective moralities**

Produce 101 was broadcast from 21 April to 23 June 2018 on Tencent Video, an online platform launched by Tencent in 2011. As a Chinese multinational conglomerate founded in 1998, Tencent is one of the world's largest social media companies, specializing in Internet-related services and products including entertainment. Tencent Video became one of the four most popular audiovisual platforms with the largest market share in China in 2019 (the other three being Youku, iQiyi and Mango TV). Its international counterpart, WeTV, was launched in 2018. Produced by Tencent Video's subsidiary Penguin Television, *101* was a wildly popular reality TV show that took the form of a two-month long battle amongst 101 girls, ranging from ages 16-28, for a chance to debut in an 11-piece girl group. In 2016, Tencent bought the rights to remake *101*, a survival show franchise first created by the South Korean media group CJ Entertainment & Media. Though the Chinese entertainment industry has a well-known history of importing reality programming concepts from abroad, *101* franchise was of particular significance to China for two reasons. First, the Chinese entertainment industry had not seen a hugely successful female survival show on TV since Hunan Satellite TV's *Supergirl* (超级女声) reached peak fame in 2005. Broadcast via Tencent's online video platform in early 2018, *101* achieved an overwhelming success with its viewership and ratings, accumulating a total of 4.67 billion views with the final episode alone reaping 470 million. Compared to the 1.13 billion viewers who tuned in to CCTV's (China Central Television) annual Spring Evening Gala just two months earlier, *101* and its immense popularity reflects China's growing media diversification. Just as the success of

Supergirl spoke to the potential for provincial TV stations to compete with and even overtake state television groups, the unprecedented popularity of *101* signifies the entrance of a formidable new competitor in the TV and entertainment industry - internet conglomerates.

101 is heir to a long-standing succession of reality talent contests that first began in the early 2000s with European and American franchises such as *Idol* and *Got Talent* (Redden 2010: 132). Shortly after, inspired in part by Britain's *Pop Idol* competition, Hunan Satellite TV stepped forth with *Supergirl*, one of China's first and most successful televised talent competitions to date. Though each show hails from a different continent, they are similar in structure and aim - contestants are cast from a sea of ordinary people, and perform in front of a panel of judges and viewers who then cast votes for their favourite star. What sets *101* apart however, is its apparent emphasis on nurturance over competition. Advertised as 'the first show in China on the growth of a girl group', *101* is one of the most popular programs in a new genre of reality TV known as the 'cultivation show (养成类真人秀)'. The show is both a forgiving and unforgiving genre for its participants, because it purports to cultivate rather than judge, nurturing new successes instead of evaluating past ones. The focus on nurturance is emphasised in the names given to the judging panel on *101*, dubbed 'mentors' instead of 'judges' as they are typically referred to. While earlier talent programs revolved around experienced contestants who were inches away from stardom, the new cultivation genre allowed even the most amateur contestants to stand out with a *Bildungsroman* narrative, casting talent competition as coming-of-age for an aspiring idol. Indeed, as one contestant declares in *101*'s first episode 'Coming here is the best coming-of-age ceremony I could have', it underscores competition as an integral component of growing up. Yet the cultivation show is also incisively unforgiving to its contestants, in that what it evaluates is not past achievements, but potential ability. As Sennett (2007:123) notes, judgments of potential cut deeper into the psyche than judgments of achievement - while achievements compound 'social and economic circumstances, fortune and chance with self,' judgments of potential focus 'only on the self'. In this sense, each form of evaluation on *101* - whether through the pyramidal ranking system or mentor feedback - all make a much more fundamental claim about each contestant and her abilities. Intrinsically forward-looking, the cultivation show more often than not constructs a narrative of nurturance and personal growth that is at once a source of reassurance and insurmountable pressure for each participant.

101 was broadcast every Saturday at 8pm on Tencent Video, averaging 510 million views per episode. Alongside similar talent competitions such as iQiyi's *Rap of China* (中国

有嘻哈) and Youku's *Street Dance of China* (这!就是街舞), *101* is one of the most successful reality talent shows produced and broadcast by Internet conglomerates rather than provincial television channels. If *Supergirl* was a testament to the ability of provincial TV stations to contend with national state broadcasters, *101* speaks to an ongoing battle for viewership between provincial satellite TV and China's biggest Internet companies. In October 2017, a production team from Tencent Video began combing through nearly 14,000 trainee singers, dancers, and actresses from hundreds of entertainment agencies in search of 101 girls who fulfilled two requirements – 'beautiful on the outside, powerful on the inside' (Ye 2018). From April to June 2018, these 101 contestants engaged in weekly song and dance performances, from which audiences both live and at home voted for the 11 contestants they liked most. Dubbed as 'girl group creators (女团创始人)', viewers were endowed with full control over who was to remain on stage. Each week, girls who received the lowest votes were eliminated - a process which continued until 22 girls remained. The top 11 received the chance to debut in a girl group under the name 'Rocket Girls' (火箭少女). Accompanying the girls throughout the show was an impressive line-up of mentors, veterans of the entertainment industry ranging from Taiwanese stars Show Luo and Ella Chen, to vocal icons Jason Zhang and Anson Hu who, like the girls they were mentoring, had also begun their singing careers in talent contests.

Reality shows' spotlight on the lowest common denominators of society has endowed its narratives with a relatability and legitimacy that has allowed its broadcasts to become dominant sites for the display of symbols in mainstream culture (Saenz 1994: 40). Implied within is the power for reality TV to serve as a site where civic values are materialised. Job-hunting shows such as *You're Hired* (职来职往) and *Only You* (非你莫属), for example, teach viewers how to package and present themselves in the job market as traditional *danwei* (state sector employer) systems become stories of the past, while outdoor game shows like *Running Man* (奔跑吧, 兄弟) gamify primitive notions of survival and 'construct community relations in terms of individual competition and self-enterprising' (Ouellette 2004: 224). Underscoring each of these popular TV shows is a neoliberal framework for 'good citizenship' that emphasizes self-sufficiency and privatised forms of conflict management - contestants must fend for themselves if they are to survive on screen.

However, *101* embeds these values of self-governance into a group-oriented setting, where individual triumphs must be reconciled with the successes of a greater whole in a meritocratic framework. As one of the program's cultural consultants describes, 'the 101 girls

form a small society among themselves, and each of them represents a different social strata' (Sina News 2018). In an interview with Sina Entertainment, the consultant notes how the original South Korean version of the show opened with contestants walking on stage through a single entrance, while the Chinese remake changed it to two walkways, leading up to a pyramid of seats numbered from 1 to 101. Such a setup allowed the girls to 'feel the differences in their background from the very beginning' (*ibid*). It is precisely this hierarchy that decides which group of girls may debut in the end, reminding us the contestants are at once competing against and cooperating with each other. Each contestant must constantly mediate between her personal aim of making it into the top 11, and collective aims of ensuring the quality and talent of all 11 girls who are to debut, casting the success of the individual as a function of the collective success. In many ways, *101* not only materialises neoliberal approaches to success and survival, but amalgamates these beliefs into a socialist framework of harmony and collective sacrifice.

Survival of the kindest: individual aims and collective good

Just as the collective dream of stardom in *101* is realised on the prerequisite that each contestant fulfils her own personal aims of self-improvement, the China Dream emphasises 'the importance of social contribution as an outcome' of one's personal achievements (Hizi 2019:38). Unlike traditional conceptions of neoliberalism which posit that social good is maximised solely through market mechanisms (Harvey 2001: 3), the Chinese state's appropriation of neoliberalism as a tool of governance asserts that increasing social good is not necessarily compatible with the pursuit of individual fulfilment, and instead must be something actively promoted by higher authority. The state achieves this through the China Dream campaign by urging individuals to appreciate their given social roles and imbues these roles with newfound meanings that subsume individual desires. In other words, self-fulfilment is cast as fundamentally incomplete without the pursuit of socially stabilising endeavours, just as national stability cannot be realised without an aggregation of individual aims.

As class discourse has evolved into narratives of upward mobility and cosmopolitanism, a nation that once deemed pyramidal hierarchies unjust has turned around and asked its people to vote girls into the top. As a representative example of reality TV's preoccupation with assessing people's capacities, *101* is a genre that emphasises personal initiative as an essential complement to the state in managing social needs and development. *101* is one of dozens of such survival shows that champion values of discipline, diligence and

sacrifice for one's dreams – constituting one's *shili* (strength), a talent nestled somewhere between nature and nurture. Its sister show *Idol Producer* (偶像练习生) that sought to debut a 9-piece boy group at the end of its competition declared throughout every episode: 'the harder you work, the luckier you are'. The singing competition *I Am a Singer* (我是歌手) trumpets the slogan: 'This is a dangerous place for singers with no talent; there is no place to stand for those without a beautiful voice'. It reminds viewers that the competition takes no mercy on its contestants - each hopeful must prove they are worthy of survival. In each of these competitions, the notion that each individual is responsible for his or her own success permeates popular survival shows.

While *101* maintains these values in its didactic orientation, it highlights individual success no longer as an end in itself, but rather a prerequisite to collective success. It thus follows that *101* at its core is not so much about which girls receive the highest number of votes as it is about how those girls reconcile personal and collective goals, and how she looks after herself while looks out for those around her. One instance that illustrates the tension between personal and collective takes place during a relay race, in which the winning team would get first-pick of the song they were to perform. Such sub-competitions that reward individuals or teams with first-mover advantages are a staple throughout the show. The opportunity to pick a song that highlights one's strengths necessarily implies a higher probability of success. What do you do, then, when an opponent falls down during a race where everyone is fighting for themselves in a frantic scurry amongst team leaders to grab the most desirable song title? As the rest of the girls ran past her, unaware or perhaps wilfully ignorant of her plight, the show host burst out in anger at the girls: 'I saw you all watch her fall down, yet you continued running (back to your teammates) nonetheless....You are a group. If one person does something wrong; the whole group is punished.' Like much of Chinese television, *101* maintains a didactic slant as the competition mentors and entertainment industry veterans philosophise at intervals not only on the cutthroat nature of the industry and the importance of discipline, but on self-conduct and the spirit of teamwork as well. As Chu (2007:269) notes, contemporary TV in China puts 'into practice a well-orchestrated, government-directed, didactic agenda - the creation of a new kind of citizen'. It has evolved largely from the heroic yet deferential subjectivity of the Mao era – one that is both 'self-reliant as well as dependable in a team . . . driven by clear goals such as the achievable prospect of a better life'. After lashing out at the girls in anger, the *101* host returns to the room and gives the girls a lesson in achieving success:

Want to debut? Work hard, be a good person! That's the prerequisite for learning how to sing and dance, for enjoying your lives...If you can't even do this, then anything else you accomplish is done for. You have no future. This is China's own *101* girl group. We are Chinese, and we use our Chinese way of doing things, to do the things we need to do. Chinese people live by their hearts, understood?

This lecture entwines seamlessly personal dreams and self-discipline with the responsibility of both debuting as a girl group, and representing China's culture industry on the global stage. It reminds the contestants and viewers that self-improvement will not only help them achieve personal success in the market economy, but advance the nation as a whole. As Rose (1996:37) elaborates, in an era where reform of the self has supplanted greater structural change, individuals 'fulfil their national obligations...through seeking to *fulfil themselves* within a variety of micro-moral domains'. As Liang Qichao emphasised a century ago in *On New People*, a nation is simply the accumulation of individuals of a society. The quality of the nation rests on the quality of the individual, and the strength of the nation is derived from the strength of the individual. Interstate competition is hence a contest between the individuals in different nations. In an globalised era where revolutionary ideology has given way to market discourse, the Chinese state has found it necessary to align collective desires with those of the individual in an effort to foster their potential in a mutually beneficial manner. The *101* contestants live this narrative through their constant negotiations between personal and collective aims.

As an apparatus of governance, *101* disciplines its contestants and viewers through an omnipresent surveillance that manifests as an 'inculcation of virtue,' as well as 'shame and scolding' (McCarthy, 2007:18) with its host lecturing contestants at length on kindness, conduct, and teamwork. It is enacted through the ubiquitous but nurturing gaze of a whole team of hosts, mentors and trainers, as well as the multitude of cameras filming each minute of their day. What is significant is the manifold levels of 'watching' in the show - it is not only the host watching the girls, but the girls watching each other, and the viewers observing all of this unfolding on their laptop screens. As Ouelette and Murray (2004:9) observe, reality TV teaches its viewers to 'allow ourselves to be watched as we watch ourselves and those around us, and then modify our conduct accordingly'. It is a mode of governance more discrete, yet equally as controlling as traditional forms of top-down surveillance. Just as neoliberalism 'relies on mechanisms for governing *at a distance*' by 'creating self-disciplining subjects' (Hay 2000: 54), *101* narrates the necessity of self-governance by

revealing how one's everyday activities are liable to scrutiny even in the absence of a traditional Big Brother-like gaze.

The *101* host further emphasises that nothing is more important than 'being kind'. In a backstage interview, one contestant comments: 'What this industry lacks most is moral upbringing. Maybe I attached too much importance to competition before this'. Such remarks temper what is otherwise a theatricised reproduction of contemporary capitalist relations with socialist ideals of moral character. In many ways, this focus on morality lends new meaning to the genre of cultivation shows, as one slowly realises what is being cultivated is not simply singing and dancing skills, but moral conduct and the self-governance - characteristics that enable the new generation of Chinese youth to succeed in a world of cutthroat competition, while concomitantly preserving social harmony. As Weber (2010:5) articulates, the cultivation show 'does not teach individuals how to cultivate the self but how to locate it' within predetermined hierarchies such as *101*'s scoring system that ranks girls from A to F and present moral frameworks by which to conduct oneself for both self-improvement and national advancement. Alongside the likes of makeover shows and survival competitions, the genre of transformation-oriented reality TV purports to liberate its subjects with the promise of 'meritocratic mobility' (Weber 2010:38) at the same time it connects them to state ideals of self-management and social responsibility.

The narrative that *101* follows bears a close resemblance to the discourse of the China Dream, which seeks to realise a collective aim through fulfilling personal aspirations. As President Xi Jinping remarked at the 12th National Peoples' Congress: 'At its core, the China Dream is the peoples' dream, and must look to the people for its realisation' (Xi 2013), suggesting that the national dream is at its core, an aggregation of individual ambitions. It is these ambitions that have liberated the individual in both an economic and spatial sense. Ultimately however, even though the tangible results of realising national prosperity - higher incomes, better housing, improved international standing - have endowed the individual with greater mobility than ever before, personal aspirations are nevertheless tethered to state-driven aims that promote national prosperity in concert with self-reliance. A key idea in the China Dream discourse is the existence of an ethno-national essence that plays an important role in an individual's sense of identity and self-realization. It paints an essential Chinese identity as a prerequisite for fulfilling individual aspirations, a sentiment reflected in the host's admonishment to the contestants. What the program purports to create is not just a girl group, but *China's* girl group -- what this entails is not explicitly specified, but one can infer

that it involves ‘being a good person’ and ‘living by the heart,’ implying that what sets China apart is a consideration for the collective often absent in the pursuit for the individual glory.

As *101*’s host reminds the contestants, individual aspirations of self-development such as ‘learning how to sing and dance’ must be pursued on the basis that one knows how to ‘be a good person,’ taking responsibility not only for oneself, but for those around her as well. He warns the girls that failure to do so means they will have ‘no future’ - a caveat that is particularly significant in that the subject is left unspecified. *Who* will have no future? Perhaps this is a question with two answers: If one achieves personal success at the expense of social responsibility, not only is she doomed to a career with no prospects, the nation as a whole also suffers as a result of her selfish pursuits. This is precisely how each individual is implicated in the nation-state, in an all-encompassing construction of national identity. By intertwining individual prospects with the future of the nation, post-reform China has returned to a renewed form of the ‘nation people’ that late Qing intellectuals first conceptualised, and that the Republic elites endeavoured to achieve. After nearly three decades of Maoist class identity, China has resumed the process of people-making with a nationalist objective of regaining its standing on the international stage. It is significant that post-reform China has gained significant authority and power in promoting a unified state vision that defines the desired qualities of its people. This differs from the late Qing era, where conflict was rife between constitutional monarchists and revolutionary republicans, and between the ‘three peoples’ principles’ and socialist principles during the nationalist period (1911-1949). Free from such contentions, the Chinese state has become more effective in shaping the subjectivity of its people and in realising its national goals, fine-tuned by generations of post-reform leadership. As such, there has never been a better consensus of national objectives and the way in which the objectives can best be achieved.

The China Dream as millennial aspirations

The neoliberal apparatus embedded within the implicit discourse around the China Dream in *101* is linked to contemporary social conditions - anxieties prevalent amongst the post-1990s generation. This unease is characterised by extremely competitive university entrance examinations, an unforgiving job market, and the need to shoulder increasingly heavy burdens of both elderly and childcare as the first and last generation of children born under the One-Child Policy filter into the labour market. *101* finds its massive popularity amongst 19-34 year olds who made up 62.5% of total viewership (Aurora Data 2018), in part because the story of a girl fighting tooth and nail for a small chance at stardom is a universal

narrative across all labour sectors. Whether it is a university, a firm, or a girl group, the ever-present anxiety of finding an institution that will accept you is all but routine in the neoliberal socio-economic order, and the 'spectre of uselessness' (Sennett 2007: 86) looms over at all times. How, then, do these anxieties give rise to the formation of both individual and collective dreams for a more promising future? The answer to this question lies in the microcosm engineered within *101*, where individual dreams coalesce in a national one through the formation of group identity, embodying an imagined collective triumph that parallels national prosperity.

In recent years, entertainment TV in China has been able to marry political communication with palatable entertainment (Sun 2010:64) - an equilibrium that *101* and other cultivation shows have expertly construed in their narratives and implications. Gorfinkle (2011:107) makes an astute observation in a study of performances on the CCTV, noting how media that purports to be light entertainment actually projects a 'cosmopolitan imaginary that goes against the grain of hard nationalism'. It draws focus to the various forms of freedom and opportunities that one may obtain upon achieving financial success. In doing so, such forms of entertainment successfully portray nation-building and state aims of economic growth as compatible with the self-realisation. *101* takes this dynamic between self-improvement and freedom one step further by creating physical barriers between the two. The contestants' accommodation halls, rehearsal rooms, and performance arenas all reside in an austere concrete building, where their phones are taken away and communication with family is limited and monitored to prevent information leakage. In many ways, this arena of self-development is not unlike the grounds of a military training camp. It is here contestants learn essential skills for survival in the entertainment industry - singing, dancing and 'becoming friends with the camera' as one mentor puts it in *101*.

More importantly however, these skills are purportedly what will liberate the girls - not only from the never-ending cycle of training and rehearsing, but the looming uncertainty over their chances of debuting. Promising greater freedom upon fulfilling individual aspirations is one challenge the China Dream campaign faces as it concomitantly prescribes a collective standard for personal dreams. How should individual desires be 'liberated' in a way that maintains an alignment with state agenda? The very first episode of *101* depicts this interplay between personal dreams and freedom visually by opening with an animated image of a floating flower petal, carried by the wind onto the stage of the performance hall, and blooming into a myriad of flowers, confined within the shape of a triangle. Rather than facing each other, each contestant stands along the edge of the triangle, looking out at what appears

to be infinite darkness. 'I am 18 years old', one contestant begins. 'My dream of joining a girl group began in middle school'. Coupled with declarations of their personal ambitions, the positioning of the contestants is significant in that what they face is not each other, but rather an expanse of darkness punctured only by stage lights, highlighting not only the estrangement that capitalism brings to social relationships, but casting this alienation as a necessary condition to fulfilling one's ambitions. Each contestant's outward orientation along the outline of the triangle amplifies the weight of their individual dreams, as they echo their aspirations into an abyss of darkness - 'My dream is to become a member of a girl group', 'to build a career and settle down' - declaration after declaration that culminates into the thematic catchphrase of *101* as all contestants chime in unison: 'I am a seed, waiting for an opportunity to rise out of the soil. I will go against the flow, and rise towards the sun!'

In many ways, the catchphrase of *101* unifies personal aspirations of each contestant under a single umbrella. Though the dreams of each contestant vary in time-frame, nature, and magnitude, all are characterised by a yearning for a kind of liberation ('I am a seed') and autonomy (I will go against the flow). Volkan's (2001) theory of 'chosen traumas' and 'chosen glories' is relevant in exploring how individual dreams and identities are interwoven into a larger collective. Just as the 'century of humiliation' played a critical role in constructing Chinese national identity (Cao, 2019), the diverse cast of *101* contestants are united by common anxieties over the impossibility of success in the entertainment industry. The chosen trauma is characterised by a sense of helplessness, weakness and shame - feelings manifest in the shared pressure and fear experienced by contestants. As a contestant reveals while sharing her dreams: 'the group I am currently in has been on the verge of disbandment twice. I don't know how much longer we can last this time.' Another contestant expresses tearfully: 'The group I used to be in was disbanded out of nowhere. I watched our Wechat group, once lively and active, turn into a chat for selling second-hand goods, and then into a chat for recruiting new members.' Perhaps what stings more than the loss of one's groupmates is the sense of helplessness associated with failures. The language that the contestants use - 'on the verge of disbandment', 'disbanded out of nowhere' - expresses passivity and vulnerability in the face of dissolution. Underlying their words is a shame akin to that of the narrative of national humiliation. Both traumas are grounded in lack of autonomy. It is from this sense of victimhood that humiliation and group identity are born. Just as contestants' former attempts at breaking into the industry devolved into a reluctant search for new beginnings, the victimhood narrative in Chinese political discourse fixates on a similar sense of powerlessness as it describes how foreign powers brought China to the

verge of subjugation, highlighting how this traumatic history embodied a collective sense of disenfranchisement and renewal. It is such adversity that provides a new and powerful impetus for efforts to reach the top, whether this involves winning one of the 11 coveted places in *101*, or dominating the global economic order in the new millennium.

These traumas pave the way for the creation of a ‘chosen glory’. Often manifested as imaginings of a glorious future that hark back to a triumphant past, the glory is a form of ‘nostalgic futurology’ (Callahan 2015:3) that envisions the future in hues of an imagined past. The chosen glory in *101* is not so much about winning the opportunity to debut, as it is about achieving autonomy and freedom through *101* - a narrative that mirrors the national discourse of rejuvenation. Motifs of revival and prosperity permeate both the dreams of *101* contestants and the broader campaign around the China Dream and national revitalisation. After recounting the disbandment of her group, one contestant proclaims with renewed determination: ‘When I am wealthy, I want to rent back our old theatre’, hypothesising a future where she possesses an autonomy predicated upon wealth. Another contestant who had already achieved significant success in South Korea as a girl group member, explains: ‘I once debuted in a girl group abroad, but I’ve come here to *101* because my roots are in China, and my dream is on stage’. A chosen glory is ‘often seen as a re-enactment of a glorious past (Wang 2014:3)’, reflected in the contestants’ reclaiming of what was taken from them - the old theatre and their cultural roots - as a similar narrative of ethnic rejuvenation. Of particular importance is the aspect of re-enactment - what is sought after is not simply glory, but a *revival* of glory, reflecting a collective nostalgia for a prosperous past, and a sense of pride in the ancient civilization. Though each contestant hails from different backgrounds and identities, the stage of *101* represents an imagined future characterised by freedom, autonomy and a chance to reclaim what was once theirs.

As such, *101* aggregates individual aspirations into a single dream, summarised succinctly by the program’s slogan: ‘go against the flow and rise towards the sun’. What is of particular interest is a comparison of the Chinese Dream with the American Dream. The difference between the two is not so much a matter of individual versus collective, as both dreams uphold the importance of individual opportunity and upward mobility, but rather how individual success is dealt with. While the American Dream treats individual success as an end in and of itself, the Chinese Dream positions these personal successes as a means to greater aims of national prosperity. This is made clear in Xi’s call to ‘integrate your own dreams into the people’s magnificent endeavours to realise the China Dream, write your own name in the glorious annals of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people’ (2013). The

China Dream campaign highlights the role that the individual plays in realising national aspirations. Unlike the preceding Hu administration that stressed the importance of a harmonious collective, the China Dream campaign has managed to amalgamate individual aspirations and collective identity, ‘integrating the state, the people, and the individual’ (Ferdinand 216:948) into the process of fulfilling national aims of economic growth and political stability. Kerr (2015:2) describes the dream as a body of water that ‘reveals the Chinese people as having a collective will and identity shaped by a difficult history’; but if each individual peers into the dream, ‘they should be able to see their own reflection in it’. It is in this way that *101* creates an aspirational narrative paralleling the discourse of the China Dream, casting contestants as ‘messengers of conformist and optimistic citizenship (Hizi 2019: 41)’ who take personal responsibility for their dreams. In doing so, the campaign plays an integral role in promoting a collective identity in the creation of new generations of people conducive to the realisation of the statist industrial modernity.

Conclusions: new people for a new era

As *101* reveals, the new genre of cultivation TV is as much about training a new generation of people as it is about cultivating singers and dancers. The model youth in post-reform China is at once self-reliant and self-sacrificing, recognising the advancement of oneself not only as a legitimate goal, but a crucial component of achieving collective prosperity. Although *101* may be hailed as a progressive media initiative that subverts authoritarian forms of governance through its commercialised voting structure and heralding of the individual, it is precisely this emphasis on individualism that serves to bolster rather than undermine state efforts in constructing a collective ideal to strive towards for the new generation. As we have noted, people-making endeavours in recent years have been characterised by the nationwide China Dream campaign, whose narrative of coalescing individual aspirations within a collective dream is reflected in *101*’s maintaining of an equilibrium between personal and social responsibility - a balance that lies at the heart of the China Dream discourse. In the post-reform context, the Dream acts as a quasi-neoliberal tool of governance - *quasi* in that it highlights the importance of personal responsibility and ‘liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms’ (Harvey 2005:2). Nevertheless, it rejects the free market as capable of maximising social good, and posits that collective endeavours must be taken up by the state to ensure its realisation.

Four decades after China’s economic reform, the broadcasting of *101* has coincided with a peaking of the number of middle-class families in China. A 2018 report on China’s

new middle class estimates that 34% of the mainland Chinese population have an annual income of RMB 300,000 - 500,000 (GBP 34,400 - 57,300), and that mainland China makes up 35% of the global middle class population (Hurun Report 2018:10). Though debate over definitions of the Chinese middle class remains contentious, ‘expanding the middle-income demographic’ has been a key imperative discussed in the CCP 18th and 19th National Congress reports. With this rising demographic trend, one can surmise the model individuals that the China Dream campaign and *101* appeal to, and seek to cultivate, is precisely the middle-class demographic – those who are self-sustaining and able to facilitate all aspects of modernisation as a force of political and economic stability. Ultimately, *101* and the new genre of cultivation TV attempt to imbue viewers with a sense of both personal responsibility and concern for the greater welfare of the society. The new generation is expected to be able to ‘govern’ China through governing themselves and accepting governance by the state. As *101* demonstrates, viewers are cast no longer as docile recipients of official doctrine, but free agents actively participating in a national project - creating the future of not only China’s entertainment industry, but China itself.

Over a century ago, Liang Qichao identified people-making as the key prerequisite of nation-state building. Fiercely opposed to Sun Yat-sen’s revolution to remove the Qing Dynasty, Liang grounded his argument on the premise that it is ‘bad people’ (人民顽劣) that made China weak and vulnerable, not the government (Cao, 2017). If the government is bad (政府顽劣), it is because of the ‘bad people’ that produced it. Without changing peoples’ mindset and conduct, nothing can be achieved at a greater societal level. Liang’s ‘new people’ campaign for national character-rebuilding became the prototype of China’s subsequent endeavours of people-making throughout the century. People-making as a social engineering project aims to create a new national consciousness, or intersubjectivity for the imagined community of the Chinese nation. Under the economic liberalisation of the post-reform era, the predominant focus for subjectivity is centred around a new relationship between the individual and the collective, in contrast to Maoist concepts of class relationships. In political terms, this new relationship involves regulating the dynamic between younger generations and the Chinese nation, under the auspices of the party-state. In formal political and popular media discourse, this relationship presents itself as a question, which does not necessarily lack a solution, but rather asks us to consider *how* this solution is delivered. The question is posed and reposed as an ongoing project for the society to engage in each new historical era: In each social group, in each social space and condition, *how* can

the relationship between the individual and the collective, the private and the public, and the personal and the national can be optimally managed in a way that advances the latter, while also benefitting the former in a post-socialist market-based society? Through various forms of soft governance in digital media, producers have had to seek out creative ways of balancing the focus on the individual versus the collective, while also maximising appeal to mass audiences in order to survive in the media market. As such, developing fresh intersubjectivity, even when it appears in the most entertaining reality shows like *101*, contributes to the promotion, circulation and reproduction of desired social relationships for the national project of industrial modernity.

It is in this sense that popular programmes like *101* have fundamental implications in the question of national revival, and are intimately entwined with the realisation of the Chinese Dream. It is the tenacious relation with collective aspirations that appeals to the viewers in their shared experiences of national humiliation, expectant national rejuvenation and pre-eminence. *101* constructs not only an experience of feminine power, but collective and national power as well, because the power construed is distinctively Chinese as claimed by its hosts, and endorsed by its viewers. *101* creates a digital spectacle in which millions of voters and viewers participate as enthusiastic spectators who are drawn to it on both an emotional and cultural level. The *101* spectacle is tantamount to a celebration – a collective confirmation of shared values, cultural assumptions and national aspirations. Working silently behind the scenes is the careful nudging hand of a team of producers, directors, mentors and cultural consultants who skilfully create and manage this spectacle. It is the production team that acts as the modern bard that produces the cultural bardic message – a message essential to realign the younger generation of Chinese with new qualities and qualifications expected of them in their roles as national participants in the new era. The message is visually, emotively and ceremonially enacted and performed to the satisfaction of viewers, through a commercially packaged product exchanged in the neoliberal entertainment market. As Debord (1994:7) observes ‘In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. . . the spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images’.

Paradoxically, the message delivered through the spectacle did not sabotage the aims of the authoritarian state with the ostensible ‘free will’ of the contestants, as it may seem at first glance. Instead, *101* has surreptitiously appropriated the neoliberal logic of individualism and freedom, and repackaged this ideal into a tool for advancing the collective. Individualism, as a cornerstone of liberal capitalism, is celebrated only at an instrumental

level of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility. What ultimately triumphs is a culturally-sanctioned collectivism that idealises social conduct. In terms of *101*'s primary viewer demographic – beneficiaries of the One Child Policy who grew up under over-protective gaze of their parents and ever-increasing material provisions – the task for corrective social conduct training is an immense challenge. These generations, defined loosely as the post-80s (80 后) and post-90s (90 后) generation, were raised not only in the most unusual of family structures, but also the fastest growing economy ever recorded in Chinese history. As Rosen (2009:360) notes, it has been 'common to find youth under attack in the Chinese media, characterized as the "me" generation and criticized for being [...] China's first generation of couch potatoes [and] addicts of online games.' Nonetheless, it is these youth who shoulder the responsibility for China's future in a new economic and geopolitical landscape, characterised by slowdowns in economic growth and deteriorating relations with the United States. But more importantly, that national image that China has been developing to present to the world amidst its growing global stature has been increasingly visible around the world. Cultivating talents in popular shows like *101* constitutes broader societal endeavours to guide the next generation of citizens to fulfil their roles and carve out a different route to modernity. *101* as a spectacle cannot be separated from social realities that provide the enduring themes, compelling narratives and prevailing values for shaping modern national narratives. It is in this sense that Debord (1994:8) contends 'Real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of spectacle, and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it'. That is the power of the media, and effect of governance through the media. As the society becomes more deeply entrenched in digital life, so too is human conduct that is more affected by the modes of digital media governance.

Just as late Qing elites appropriated the European notion of 'nation' to create the modern Chinese state, neoliberalism has come to underpin the new socioeconomic order in China as the state seeks to equip the new generation with the skills and resilience needed to compete on the global stage. Western ideas, institutions and practices are thus constantly drawn upon pragmatically to upgrade the toolkit for people-making as an on-going process, as the state continuously (re)defines new strategic objectives. China may have what appears to be a tightly controlled and closed-off society, but within its borders, it has an open mind – a collective mind bent on assimilating the newest tools for the national project of self-renewal. China's remarkable flexibility is underpinned by its determination to rise up from its crushing political and economic fall during the 'century of humiliation' (1840-1945). Beyond

the period of the Cultural Revolution, dogmatism is in fact an aberration in China's modern history, contrary to popular perception in the West. If we look back on the history of modern China, it becomes clear that from late Qing elites to contemporary policymakers, the revival of an ancient civilisation in the modern world has served as the single most salient objective for its political and intellectual leaders. In the three primary tasks of building a modern nation, a modern state and a modern people, the first two have been achieved with considerable success. The Chinese nation, since Liang first coined the concept in 1902, has become the most important idea imprinted in the Chinese psyche. The Chinese state, created at the fall of the dynastic ruling house, has come to hold an unparalleled concentration of power. The process of people-building, however, is far from complete as China continues on the journey of national regeneration. Its parameters are periodically adjusted in accordance to the state's identification of strategic priorities. As China moves ever closer to the centre of international stage, the perceptions and standards of desirable 'qualities of people' are constantly in flux. Nonetheless, the appropriation of what is useful from the west, including economic ideology will continue to play a role in the evolution of these 'qualities' while simultaneously serving domestic aims of forging a distinct Chinese national character. As Liang advocated in the era of pre-modern China, 'renewal of the people' is the most sure-fire way of reviving the oldest living civilisation in the world.

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