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Chinese Reality TV

- A Case Study of GDTV's *The Great Challenge for Survival*

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Abstract

The emergence of reality programming has a parallel development with Chinese television media at the beginning of this century. This study of Chinese “Reality TV” is based on a case study of a pioneer Chinese reality production, namely *The Great Challenge for Survivor* (GDTV, 2000-2006). The general concern of this thesis is an examination of the localizing of popular foreign outdoor survival formats (the Japanese top-rating *Airway Boys* and the international format *Survivor*) within a Chinese context. The study of this subject consists of field research into a major Party-state owned television broadcaster and a comparative analysis of the six broadcast seasons of the selected example.

The research outcome presented here highlights some distinctive Chinese patterns in the outdoor survival reality strand prevailing early in this century and articulates the complex roles that a nationalized television station was required to play in the industrialized reform era. By recognizing the GDTV crew’s continuous efforts to improve production quality and to satisfy their assumed audiences’ needs, the thesis further addresses some key factors of the specific institutional system and broad media environment shaping local reality programme makers' decision making.

Facing a “special television zone” in China, the local producer’s continuous modification of their reality programming was on the cutting edge of commercialization and globalization in the early 2000s. The production of the studied case was an exploratory enterprise which involved a set of negotiations, arguments and compromises while dealing with a range of issues which emerged in such areas as the cultural landscape, social environment, political discourse and economic power. To a large extent, the manifested transition taking place in this studied local production mirrors unprecedented social and economic changes occurring in contemporary China.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 An Overview

Shortly before the new millennium, the so-called “Reality TV” boom started in Western media and rapidly developed into a global television trend. Over the last decade, this controversial cultural phenomenon has received great attention by social commentators and media scholars worldwide. This doctoral research is about “Reality TV” in a Chinese context, based on a case study of a pioneering Chinese reality series, called *The Great Challenge for Survival* (abbr. *TGCFS*) (*Shengcun da tiaozhan*) (GDTV¹, 2000-2005) (see Figure 1). This outdoor-survival format was modelled on a popular Japanese hitchhiking-based reality show, *Airwave Boys* (*Denpa Shonen*) (NTV² 1998) and the US high-rating *Survivor* (CBS, 2000).

In the past decade, the *Survivor* format has generated great interest among television producers and audiences worldwide. Following the phenomenal success of the premiere of CBS’s *Survivor* in 2000, this format has been sold to more than 30 countries worldwide. Different local versions of the popular hybrid formats often have their own flavour and style. Moreover, inspired by the *Survivor* concept, numerous survival-oriented/based programmes have proliferated in the global television market, such as *The Amazing Race*, *The Mole* and *I’m a Celebrity...Get me out Of here!* (Baker, 2003).

¹ Guangdong Television Station is a provincial level television station located in the Guangdong province in the southeast of China.

² Nippon Television Network Corporation is a Japanese commercial television broadcaster.



The 1st season
Tracing China Overland Border (2000)



The 2nd season
Retracing the Long March Route (2001)



The 3rd season
Heroines Cross Heaven Pass (2002)



The 4th season
Brave Travel across History (2003)



The 5th season
Hero on the Way (Ying xiong gu dao) (2004)



The 6th Season
Hero under the Heaven (2005)

Figure 1 Six seasons of *TGCFS*

The selected case, *TGCFS*, was one of the leading local productions in the “outdoor survival” category, a dominant strand on domestic television screen early in this

century. This large-scale reality production was created by a government-operated major provincial television station during a period in which the Chinese television industry was undergoing a dramatic transformation. The main aim of this research design was to examine the televisual presentation and production agenda of a Chinese mainstream reality format, to discuss the issue of localizing foreign television formats, relating to the specific production environment and wider social changes taking place in Mainland China.

“Reality TV” is a term which emerged in the late 1990s. “Popular factual television programme” or “documentary hybrids” are also commonly used in Western public and academic commentary respectively as alternative terms. These terms all have been loosely applied to label a continuum of televisual texts (rather than a set of programmes) sharing the characteristics of presenting “real” people’s “real” life experience and combining constructed television genres with conventional documentary styles. This type of programming ranges from commercial-driven game shows such as *Fear Factor* (NBC, 2001-) to the edutainment-oriented “hands-on history” format *Frontier House*³ (PBS, 2000). Currently, game-docs, docu-soaps and other genetic mixtures have become “a mainstay of [networks’] television schedules” (Barnfield, 2002, p.47) in the Western media.

A similar mediascape has occurred across the Asian-Pacific region, including Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Australian and New Zealand (see Moran & Keane, 2004). In the East, factual-based entertainment shows first emerged in Japan in the early 1990s and became very popular on Japan television in the late 1990s (Iwabuchi, 2004; Penn, 2003). At the beginning of the new century, reality trends started to burgeon in many Asian countries and regions, which included Mainland China. “Reality TV” gained access to Chinese television media via local producers’ imitation of popular Western television formats (Keane, 2003).

³ This six episode series takes three modern American families back to the 1880s and presents their five-month living experiences in a Montana homestead.

However, the development of “Reality TV” in Mainland China has rarely been addressed in Western public commentaries and academic writing.

The advancement of information technologies and China’s increasing frequency of international communication in the late 1990s allowed Chinese television programme makers to catch on up-to-date global television trends. The emergence of reality programming in China nearly paralleled to the boom of “Reality TV” trends in the West at the beginning of this century. However, it was not until the nationwide phenomenal success of a Chinese spin-off of a market-tested Western pop *Idol* format, namely *Super Girls*⁴ (HNSTV⁵, 2005), that the Chinese public eventually greeted a similar reality cult. Since then the talent-show based formula has become the favourite of the domestic television market and Chinese “Reality TV” started to come to the Western public’s knowledge. This research focuses on exploring the emergence of “Reality TV” in China and discusses the pioneering reality strand’s struggle for survival in a distinctive Chinese media environment.

An in-depth study on the outdoor survival-format is based on longitudinal field research conducted in GDTV from May to December in 2006 and a comparative analysis of the local programme with its two foreign originals. The analysis of the research data (e.g. audio-visual products, production notes, interview data, institutional archives and publications written in both Chinese and English) concentrates on the identification of distinctive Chinese patterns which emerged in the televisual text and the production agenda of six broadcast seasons of *TGCFs* series (2000-2005) and the two observed productions in 2006; the abortive seventh season of *TGCFs* (see Figure 2 & Appendix 1) and a quasi-reality series, *Go to the West* (See

⁴ In the summer of 2004, Hunan Satellite Television Station successfully debuted the inaugural season of the female singer contest show, *Super Girls* in its regionally-broadcast channel. A year later, the second season was launched on a domestically broadcast satellite channel and achieved phenomenal success nationwide. In 2008, the show changed its name to *Happy Girls*.

⁵ Hunan Satellite Television Station is a provincial-level network located in middle continent. HNSTV has developed as one of the flagship provincial-level television networks in the Chinese television industry by successfully producing a group of name brand entertainment and information-oriented television programmes since the late 1990s..

Figure 3 & Appendix 1).



Figure 2 The cover of the production plan of the seventh season of *TGCFS* (2006)



Figure 3 *Go to the West Following the Footprint of the Master Monk Xuan Zhang* (2006)

1.2 Personal and Intellectual Engagement

This choice of topic and the decision to conduct this research can be traced to my personal and intellectual engagement with the research subject. I have a long-time research and personal interest in the non-fiction film genre and in factual-based television formats. I noticed that, earlier this century, Chinese audiences in Mainland China had limited access to original Western reality programmes via the heavily

government-censored domestic television screen. Nevertheless, a number of local adaptations of varied globally popular reality formats, in particular the *Survivor* format in domestic television channels and Chinese-language international satellite channels, gave the domestic viewer a profile of the new breed of televisual presentations⁶.

The successful debut of *TGCFs* series in the summer of 2000 signalled the rise of Chinese “Reality TV” and set off a trend of outdoor-survival formats on domestic television screen. However, my primary research on this topic in 2005 found that due to a lack of access to Chinese media and the obvious language barriers, “Reality TV” studies in a Chinese context were absent in public commentaries and scholarly publications in the West. “Reality TV” was also a new topic for Chinese academia. Although “Reality TV” as a new global cultural phenomenon and newly-emerged television trend in China has already generated wide public attention and social debates in China, Chinese scholars’ contributions to the understanding of “Reality TV” in the Chinese context have been limited in their number, depth and scope.⁷

The decision to conduct this exploratory research in a new field of study was based on several factors. Firstly, my bi-lingual and bi-cultural status allows me to easily access the Chinese media. Secondly, my work experience in the Chinese television industry and my knowledge of Western “Reality TV” (developed from both viewing experience and theoretical research through my years of living and studying in New Zealand) would aid the potential of achieving some valuable outcomes in this doctoral-level research. Thirdly, secured research funding and my personal contact with a local production (*TGCFs*) provided strong support for carrying out this research project.

1.3 The Significance of the Research

⁶ A profile of Chinese television media and industry is provided in Chapter Two.

⁷ A review of Chinese studies on “Reality TV” is included in Chapter Three.

In the last decade, “Reality TV” as a new and controversial cultural phenomenon has been studied by media scholars worldwide. Reality programming has been widely viewed as a demonstration of the inter-relationship of a localization and globalization of television media, and as an outcome of the increasing marketization and commercialization of the global television environment (see Dovey, 2000, Kilborn, 2003, Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, Murray & Ouellette, 2004, *et al*). The theoretical debate on many popular reality formats has been widened from a narrow focus on criticizing popular hybrids programmes as “Trash TV”, to a broader scope. Western academic studies have demonstrated that this new television trend can be used to explore a variety of issues in relation to the fundamental changes taking place within the cultural, social and political spheres in Western societies. These issues include the global trade in television formats, the collapse of conventional television forms, the blurred boundary between the public and private spheres, the preference of personalized narratives over institutional knowledge and the foregrounding of performance within factual-based forms⁸.

Keane (2003) argued that “many of the changes occurring in Chinese society are in accord with global transformation” (p.89). Television, as one of the most important media in China, also reflects a strong global influence, in terms of its economy and culture. Chinese public commentaries and academic writings published in the last decade suggest that the development of Chinese “Reality TV” has relevance to many issues pertinent to the evolution of contemporary Chinese society. These issues include the reform of the Chinese television industry, the prevalence of the Internet, the emergence of an urban middle class and the tendency of media liberalization.

China’s media, in particular television, has been government protected through media policies and regulation to minimize external influences. The distinctive cultural background, social environment and political-economic system have resulted in a unique media system and television market. Chinese television media started

⁸ These issues are explained in detail in Chapter Three.

industrialized reform in the mid 1990s. By the end of the 1990s, it had already developed into a prolific television industry. However, due to the Chinese government's tight control on the import quota of foreign programmes, Chinese television networks could not rely heavily on directly importing market-tested programmes to fill their television schedules. Over the past decade, localizing global reality formats has become the major means for both state-operated television institutions and private-run media houses to catch up on the global television trend.

The increasing commercialization of Chinese television industry and the growing influence of Western media output on Chinese television culture have made the global television format appear very similar to Western "Reality TV". Based on the selected case, two major global cultural influences are discussed in this thesis. Japan is an Asian leading television format provider to pan Asian countries and regions (such as Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China) (Iwabuchi, 2004) and the US is a major player in the global television format trade. The interaction between the global reality television trends and China's unique media environment has raised some interesting issues in relation to the localization of the transnational/global reality format.

The established Western studies have demonstrated that "Reality TV" is a very broad topic. The diversity of reality formats, the fragmentation of domestic audience demographics, the complexity of the Chinese television system, and the inconsistent development of the Chinese television industry make it impossible to cover all aspects of Chinese "Reality TV" in one doctoral research project. Therefore, it seemed more efficient to focus on a single case study and then to expand arguments to several important issues and speculations about "Reality TV" in a Chinese context by analyzing various aspects of the studied case.

The example studied here was on the cutting edge of trends of Chinese television making in a particular history period of the reform of Chinese television media. The

basic formula of *TGCFs* is to record volunteer participants taking up survival challenges set by the programmer maker during a long-distance journey. It was initially derived from a well-received Japanese hybrid programme *Airwave Boys* broadcast in Hong Kong Television broadcasts Limited⁹ (ATV) in 1998. The six years of the production history displayed a growing influence of the *Survivor* format on the majority of the domestic outdoor-survival format productions. The overall televisual presentation of this localized reality format is displayed as a mixture of “*Airwave Boys*” style, “*Survivor*” formula and local content.

This studied case was produced by a specific territorial television station. GDTV as one of the major provincial-level television stations¹⁰ represents the main force of television making in China. GDTV programme makers face a unique regional market which has been widely recognized as a “special zone”¹¹ of the Chinese television market¹² (Hua & Lu, 2006). Guangdong province by far has been the only region that was opened to overseas television broadcasters since China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). GDTV operators have been in the forefront of playing the dual roles of the mouth-piece of Chinese government and a money generator in response to an increasingly competitive regional and domestic television market.

The successful debut of its inaugural season through domestically-broadcast Guangdong Satellite Television Channel and regional-aired Pearl River Channel in the summer of 2000 inspired many other state-owned television stations and private-run domestic media houses to produce a group of outdoor survival-based

⁹ ATV is a commercial television station in Hong Kong.

¹⁰ In 2000s, Chinese television system made up of three levels of television stations, ranging from central, provincial to city.

¹¹ This term is derived from “Special Economic Zone” (SEZ) in Shenzhen and Zhuhai in Guangdong province where has green light to exercise capitalistic commodity economy and consequently has become affluent ahead of other regions (Gittings, 1997) in China. Here television “special zone” refers to the area which is at liberty to test market competition in an internationalized local television environment. Its experience of competing local market share with a number of international television channels has been expected to be emulated by other television operators.

¹² The uniqueness of the television market in Guangdong province is articulated in Chapter Two.

reality programmes. Chinese scholars Xie and Hong (2007) note that

This pioneering reality programme created significant impact both domestically and internationally. CCTV's talk show, *Tell it Like it is*¹³ invited three participants to join in a studio discussion about the show. The significance of the inaugural season of *TGCFs* is that its televisual text and practical experience have been provided for reference by many later reality programmes (p.20).

The satisfying audience ratings and favourable social response encouraged the programme makers to continue producing the *TGCFs* format. The series was developed as a name-brand programme of GDTV and was awarded one of the "Ten Chinese Reputable TV programmes" in 2002 (by the Chinese Television Artists Association in 2002).

TGCFs achieved a long-run of six seasons which made it unique in the outdoor survival strand. The history of the series provides a rich example to discuss a range of issues related to the wider research topic of Chinese "Reality TV", including the transformation of the format, the advancement of production techniques, the growing commercialization of programming and the experiments of different production models. The continuous modification, innovation and transformation of the *TGCFs* formula and production mode throughout the six seasons mirrors the significant changes with the production environment and television market between 2000 and 2006.

The commercialization of the Chinese television market and the industrialization of the Chinese television system since the late 1990s have signalled the gradual reduction of the gap between the developed Western television industry and a developing Chinese one. The six broadcast series reflects a shift from an emphasis on conventional documentary, to a highly structured mixture of documentary style,

¹³ *Talk it Like it is (Shihuashihuo)* (1997) is national television, CCTV's top rating talkshow. In early 2001, it made an episode about GDTV's inaugural season of *TGCFs*, namely "Survival experience under the camera observation" (Jing tou xia de sheng cun ti yan)

dramatic narrative and game show formula. The more recent series demonstrate hybridity clearly.

The increasingly competitive television market has resulted in the fact that this series has become more and more entertainment-oriented and market-driven. This kind of change seems to echo John Corner's (2002) idea of moving into a "Post-documentary" culture where the boundary between fiction and non-fiction television genres becomes increasingly blurred¹⁴. In the meantime, entertainment and performance have become foregrounded in factual programming. However, in dealing with the Western-derived reality format production, Chinese television makers have faced issues such as media censorship, public concerns of ethics, and ordinary participants' attitudes against the more extreme Western brand of reality-based humiliation.

My pilot research indicates that the localization of global formats has been the central issue discussed by Chinese media scholars in response to the new cultural phenomenon (Yin 2006, Xie & Chen, 2007, et al). Local television makers have shown a growing recognition of the necessity and significance of localizing the foreign television format. Both the literature review and my production research indicate that Chinese media professionals were aware of unsatisfactory audience ratings from the broadcast of the re-versioned original season of CBS's *Survivor* on the national TV channel, CCTV2 in 2001.

These examples demonstrate that some Western popular reality formats may lose their global currency when transferred to the Chinese context. In particular, some 'extreme' Western brands of reality-based humiliation, sexual display and voyeurism would not fit with the nationally-imposed socialist ethics and political ideologies. Since television in China is still tightly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

¹⁴ An explanation of this concept is in Chapter Two

and continue to play a role as a governmental instrument, any programme that contains elements which are ethically or politically sensitive are likely to be excluded from Chinese television screens by hygienical policy guidelines.

The interaction between economic-political reforms and conventional Chinese ethical values has resulted in some distinctive production patterns, such as an emphasis on infotainment value, the concern of socio-political responsibility, the ambivalence of an authentic approach and an exploration of commercial operations. These manifest characteristics of this survival-based hybrid format and the cultural impact of transnational/global formats are reflected through textual analysis, and identified through production observation and a range of interviews with the production crew members, participants and local journalists, and have been shared by many other domestically-produced outdoor-survival format productions and provincial-level television stations in general.

It can be said that this research project on a historically unique case study can help to understand the dramatic changes in the Chinese broadcasting environment in the post-WTO era, the pioneering nature of the series, and the ways in which the production team attempted to navigate a new institutional set of constraints and possibilities. Consequently, this study is valuable for providing insight into a particular production which is at the centre of some major changes in one of the largest television markets in the world. Moreover, the value of this research is also reflected by its unique research method and production access. Globally speaking, this kind of production research is still rare within television study. This study reveals the compromises that are made between the design and execution of a production, and the creative tensions that occur between production personnel (or especially relevant here, between the crew and participants at times). This gives a valuable insight into the nature of television as a medium that is not possible through simple textual analysis. Overall, this thesis addresses a huge gap within the global literature on the development of reality formats.

1.4 The Key Argument of the Thesis

This research concentrates on exploring the emergence of the outdoor-survival strand and discusses its struggle for survival in a distinctive Chinese media environment. The defining feature of this production research was focused on the nature of the “localizing” efforts by the *TGCFs* crew. Facing a particular set of constraints in the Chinese television system (e.g. overseas programming was not screening in its original form, local institutions have their own established practices, audiences are suspicious of Western-style programming, etc.), Chinese television makers exercised very different production practices in reality programme making. Therefore, the *TGCFs* team had to relearn their craft, to experiment and to take risks. The issues addressed and arguments raised in this thesis emphasize the practice of the localization of a specific survival-based hybrid format in a Chinese context. Such an emphasis not only made the study of Chinese television, in particular this kind of reality format, more globally relevant but also captured a television trend which is historically significant for the Asia region.

In the past two decades, the practice of “localization” in China has often been carried out by imitating popular overseas programmes (Keane, 2004). The diverse presentations of similar formulas can be attributed to various factors. From a micro view, the differences are often reflected in the production techniques, methods and scale, including aspects like the budget, casting, setting, cinematography, facilities and editing. From a macro perspective, the differences are seen in the specific production environment, the cultural frameworks, ethical values and viewing tastes.

The changing landscape of Chinese television media has been generated by both general external impacts (e.g. the global flow of television programming and the force of new communication technologies) and distinctive internal factors (e.g. China’s media policy, the Chinese Communist Party’s political mandates and audience’s

concerns of media content). As Hong (1998) argues, China is one of a few nations where “internal factors are the decisive reasons for the changes” (p.xiv). The production research examines how external and internal factors impacted the Chinese reality production and identifies the roles these factors played in the decision making process of the local production team.

The influence of intra-Asian cultural flows (Iwabuchi, 2001) and Western commercial/entertainment culture output on the pioneer Chinese reality production are examined through textual analysis, production talks and public commentaries. A comparison of this Chinese reality series with its Japanese and American originals raises several relevant issues that relate to the idea of “cultural adaptivity” (Iwabuchi, 2004) and “cultural discount” (Hoskins and Mirus, 1998)¹⁵. These are the crucial aspects of gaining competitive advantage from localizing a global format to win marketing campaigns in the domestic television market. Imitating a Japanese original helped the first season of *TGCFs* to win high audience ratings and gain favourable social comments. With the introduction of *Survivor* elements into the production of the later seasons, the local production team experienced a drop in audience ratings and an increase in social criticism about the programme being increasingly entertainment-oriented and ratings-driven.

Despite the similarities that the Chinese adaptations share with the foreign original formats, in particular their concept and formula, many locally-produced reality programmes have reflected a strong sense of “Chineseness” in their content, televisual presentation and production agenda. The distinctive patterns identified in the televisual presentation of the *TGCFs* series include the construction of *heroism* in the portrayal of the “ordinary” challenger, an emphasis of the *collectivism* in the *Survivor* style competition, the favouring of *cultural spectacle* in the entertainment programming and the promotion of *political ideologies* in a contrived media event.

¹⁵ Iwabuchi’s concept of “cultural adaptivity” and Hoskins and Mirus’ idea of “cultural discount” are explained in Chapter Three.

This thesis attempts to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the exercise of localizing a transnational/global television format in the Chinese media environment and to give some insight into the current development of Chinese television media.

The discussion of localization is carried out in three layers. Primarily, this case study examines the complex nature of hybrid format making from the aspects of generic approach, casting, format design and marketing. Secondly, this research analysed how the nature of the Party-state owned television institution impacted on the decision making of a rating-driven reality programme, in regards to the issues of entertainment, politics and commercialization. Thirdly, this study reveals how the broad changing environment of Chinese media and society is reflected in this television format, featuring everyday Chinese people.

Based on this kind of research approach, some specific questions explored in this research include,

- What are the distinctive Chinese features demonstrated in the production and televisual presentation of *TGCFS* series?
- What kind of genre assumptions did the production crews hold in relation to the development of “Reality TV” in China?
- What were the Chinese participants’ experience and responses to the new media experience?
- How did the Chinese production crew adapt a globally popular reality format within a unique Chinese media context?
- How does the development of *TGCFS* series mirror the changing landscape of the Chinese television industry?
- How useful is Western research in discussions of the Chinese history of development of reality TV?

- What does this case study reveal about the emergence of reality formats globally?

The production team's collective and individual concerns were strongly influenced by the wider Chinese media environment, socio-political circumstances and conventional (Chinese) ethics. The situations that the interviewees experienced, the challenges they faced and the problems they had to deal with add complexity to the study of the broad scope of Chinese "Reality TV".

1.5 The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis consists of four parts: introduction (Chapters One and Two), theoretical discourse (Chapters Three and Four), production agenda (Chapters Five to Ten) and conclusion (Chapter Eleven). Chapter Two: Television Media and Reality TV in China aims to provide some background information and essential knowledge in relation to the research subject. This chapter contains a brief history of the Chinese television industry, reviews some distinctive patterns of contemporary Chinese television media, articulates the uniqueness of GDTV and Guangdong television market, and offers an overview of the development of "Reality TV" in China in the past decade. These contents are crucial for the understanding of the complex production context that the *TGCFs* crew deal with in the unique media environment during a specific reforming period in Chinese history.

The following two chapters concentrate on discussing relevant theories to enhance the understanding of the researcher's theoretical approach and engagement in this study. Chapter Three establishes theoretical frameworks for the core discussions and arguments in the thesis. Both Western established theories of the new global media phenomenon and Chinese scholarly studies on domestic "Reality TV" are reviewed in this chapter. Chapter Four then articulates the researcher's consideration of methodology, in terms of research approach, methods, obstacles and limitations. This

chapter also explains the concrete research methods and addresses some relevant issues that emerged during the field research in GDTV.

Chapter Five to Ten build the central argument of the thesis, in terms of how the *TGCFs* production team “localized” the foreign reality formats for the Chinese context, and how this exercise evolved over the six seasons. This structure opens up a number of major issues which emerged in the production history and builds up an integrated profile of the production arch. The major issues in relation to the central argument of the thesis include the origin of the *TGCFs* format, the generic confusion of the documentary hybrid production, the role and experience of ordinary Chinese participants, the balance of political obligation and entertainment value, the application of commercial operation to the production, the development of an original game formula and efforts to continuously improve a production model.

These six chapters use different seasons to engage in detailed discussions on the problems and issues that the local programme makers and participants encountered in the six years of production history. In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of the reality format production, the discussion in this thesis deals with six seasons more or less in a chronological way. Such a structure not only makes it easy to address the evaluation of the *TGCFs* format making by years, but also is of benefit to a broad discussion on the transformation of Chinese television media and industry. In the entire thesis, many important aspects of this studied production interact different ways across various seasons. Therefore, many issues are mentioned across the chapters, but are discussed from different respects.

Chapter Five: The Origin of the *TGCFs* focuses on discussing several major issues relating to the emergence of Reality TV in China, including GDTV’s travel documentary tradition, the emergence of outdoor sports culture among urban youth and the impact of foreign reality programming. Based on the case study of the first reality programme, this research examines the influence of a Japanese hitchhiking

format *Airwave Boy* (NTV, 1998) and CBS' original season of *Survivor* (2000) on the programming of *TGCFs*. This chapter also highlights local programme makers' major considerations of social criticism and cultural adaptability while localizing the foreign formats to adapt to the Chinese situation.

Chapter Six: Dramatic Effects and Documentary Approach highlights the key conception of reality programme making. The inaugural season (see Appendix 1) was used as the major example to discuss these Chinese documentary programme makers' production approach to the subject in comparison to the original *Airwave Boys*. This chapter also addresses the crew members' generic confusion of fact-fiction programming and reveals major conflicts which emerged in the pioneering reality programme making, in respect of the issue of the control of the filming, and the reconstruction of raw materials to ensure a dramatic effect.

Chapter Seven: the Role and Experience of Participants focuses on an important aspect of reality production; ordinary Chinese participants. The discussion of participants consists of two parts. This chapter firstly reviews the casting process and articulates the GDTV crew's considerations in selecting their "preferred" participants to satisfy the needs of the programme and to please their assumed viewing audience. The first season is again used as a major example to demonstrate local reality programme makers' speculation about their target audience's relationship with an emerging Chinese urban young middle class. This chapter then identifies some distinctive features shared by many Chinese participants in relation to their common motivations of participation, their typical presentations in front of the camera, and unique reflections on their media experience. The changes in participants' attitudes towards the idea of game playing and being on television, across the six seasons, are also discussed in this chapter. Generally speaking, to discuss these two aspects together allows us to identify the connection between the selected "ordinary people" and the assumed audience, and to articulate how the cultural context of outdoor sports and traditional Chinese ethical values affected the *Survivor*-style competition.

Chapter Eight: Entertainment Function and Political Purpose is based on the second season (see Appendix 1) which was a unique case in the series' production history. On the one hand, this season had a political subject about the revolutionary history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Many games and tasks thereby were associated with the historical context of the Long March¹⁶. On the other hand, however, in response to increasing pressure from the local market, the crew also started to integrate *Survivor* elements (e.g. two-team competition, periodical elimination and tribal council) into the travel-based format to enhance its entertainment value. This season demonstrated how entertainment function, cultural value and political propaganda coexisted in a rating-oriented reality production. Overall, this chapter emphasizes exploring the dynamics of entertainment and politics in the production of the second season and extends this discussion to the domestically popular “retracing Long March” strand in the past half decade.

Chapter Nine: Commercial Operation and Institutional Environment examines the conflicts and contradiction between the Western-style commercial operation of production and a long-established institutional system. From the third season (see Appendix 1) commercialism started to be embedded in the production agenda of the *TGCF* format. The foregrounding of commercial factors (e.g. “beauties”, “huge cash prize” and “overseas locations”) in the programming of the third season provided a cutting-edge example of a local programme maker becoming anxious to win a ratings battle. This chapter highlights some obstacles that the crew encountered while processing their production design within their host institution. Various aspects of the commercial operation (e.g. target market, advertising sale, cost control, branding, sponsorship, publicity and distribution) are analyzed to help make sense of the complex production environment that the state-employed television maker had to deal

¹⁶ The Long March was a major strategic movement of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. Between 1934 and 1935, the red army marched 12,500 kilometres and succeeded in reaching the revolutionary base in northern Shanxi province.

with in the primary stage of the industrialization of Chinese television media.

Chapter Ten: Original Formula and Creative Approach reveals how the studied case made a breakthrough in format design and production methods. In order to solve a set of problems and issues which emerged in the production of the first three seasons, the *TGCFs* crew actively sought for solutions both within the team and outsourcing expertise from the industry. Based on the example of the fourth season (see Appendix 1), this chapter provides some insights into the originality of the locally-designed so-called “1+2+3” game formula and the creativity of new working methods. From an in depth analysis of the ideas involved in the design of the new game formula, the research reveals the great efforts that local programme makers made to create their original game rules to adapt to assumed Chinese viewing tastes and production environment. An examination of the behind-the-scenes aspect of the production also indicates the production team’s intention to polish their production approach to improve the quality of their programme and the efficiency of their production operation.

Chapter Eleven is a conclusion summarizing the research findings. This final chapter answers the research questions listed earlier this chapter and also identifies the limitations of this study. Based on the case study of this local series and production, the researcher provides an overview of the localization of global reality formats in a board China context and speculates on future studies on the subject.

1.6 Conclusion

This is unique research capturing a sense of the challenges and opportunities for Chinese television makers in the post-WTO era. An examination of the influence of the nature of the team as well as the demands from both institutions and audiences on the local production helps to understand the complexity and difficulties of

successfully localizing a global popular reality format in China. The changes of programming which occurred during the production history also indicate how the development of the *TGCFs* series mirrors the broad transformation of the Chinese media environment in the post-WTO era.

This thesis attempts to make some contributions to the fields of documentary theory and television research into the localization of global reality formats. Since the study of Chinese “Reality TV” in the Chinese context has remained a relatively unexplored research topic in Western media studies, these qualitative research outcomes can offer some insights into the development of Chinese “Reality TV” in the Chinese context and build some groundwork for other media scholars to step into this research field.

Chapter Two: Television Media and Reality TV in China

In the past three decades, China has been among the fastest growing countries in the world. Television media as the mainstream media has been developing with a rate comparable to the nation's economic growth and structural transformation (Chan, 1998). Since the mid 1990s, China's media landscape has been experiencing significantly changes. The development of television media started to narrow the gap between Chinese television industry and its Western counterparts.

In order to make sense of the uniqueness of the contemporary Chinese television production environment, this chapter provides some background knowledge about the development of the television media and industry in Mainland China, in particular in the period that China has “successfully transformed itself from a centrally planned economy to an open market economy” (Chan, 1998, p.273). Overall, the chapter consists of three parts. The specific role of television media, the structure of television system and the reform of television industry are articulated in the section titled “Television in Mainland China”. The status of GDTV and the unique pattern of Guangdong television market are revealed in the section “Guangdong Television Market”. A brief introduction to the overall development of Chinese “Reality TV” in the past decade is also included in this chapter.

2.1 Television in Mainland China

2.1.1 Television in the Pre-reform Period

Television by far is “the most influential medium in China” (Zhao and Guo, 2005, p.521). It is one of the major resources for Chinese household entertainment and access to information (Wang, Lu, and Fore, 2005). In the Chinese context, television has been considered a news medium and treated as the “mouthpiece” of the

Party-state since its birth in 1958. “[T]he television value chain has been subject to the administration of officials in the Ministry of Film, Radio and Television (now the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, or SARFT)” (Donald, Keane & Yin, 2002, p.12). During the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, television experienced a stagnant period. It was not until the Chinese government initiated economic reform and adopted the “open door” policies at the end of the 1970s that Chinese television began to experience a number of internal changes.

With the rapid growth of the national economy and the fast expansion of domestic television networks in the 1980s, television soon developed as a mainstream medium¹. In order to ensure that signals would cover the entire nation, Chinese television stations set up a four-level system of stations: central, provincial, city and country, with one station often broadcasting on more than one channel. All television stations in China are government-owned and run by the Party who control the broadcasting channels and act as the major media content provider.

“In the pre-commercialization days, the functions of media were limited to those of a state apparatus, providing guidance, propaganda, and education” (Chan & Chan, 1998, p.650). As an outcome of the planned economy, television stations in China belonged to a type of fully state subsidized public service institution (*Shiye danwei*) which provided, in Keane's words “a one-to-many model of broadcasting and its programming served the interests of propagandists” (Keane, 2003, p.95). With strong support from the Chinese government through funding and favourable policies (Wang, Liu & Fore, February 2005), television broadcasters were not encouraged to consider revenue building or to be concerned with viewing ratings.

In the early 1990s, the Chinese government further opened up China to the outside

¹ In 1978 mere 2% of Chinese households owned a television set and China only had about 80 million television audience. From then on the number increased 61 million per year. By 1987, the percentage of Chinese households owning a television set went up to 47. 8% and the population of Chinese television audiences reached 0.6 billion (Guo, 1997).

world and accelerated economic development by applying Deng Xiaoping's version of capitalism: "a commodity economy with socialist characteristics" (Keane, 2004, p.89). Chinese television industry also gradually moved from a closed to a more open system. Chinese television achieved an unprecedented reach with an increasing penetration rate of television sets in Chinese households and with new means of television signal transformation (in the early 1990s, cable television formally went into operation). At that time, 30 provincial television stations started to launch their own satellite channels to reach audiences nationwide.

2.1.2 Television in the Reform Period

In 1993, television and broadcasting were formally categorized into the scope of tertiary industry and in 1995, Chinese television industry began to reform (Zhang, 2002). It allows Chinese television broadcasters to further narrow the disparities in commercial operation among Chinese and world leading television networks. As Weber (2002) notes, "[t]he party's decision to introduce a competitive, self-funding structure into the domestic television system since 1995 centred around implementing Western management practices and thinking, advertising revenue building, foreign programming, technology transfer, foreign investment, and improved consumer choice" (p.57).

In 1998, the Chinese government decided to gradually cut down the annual fund to the majority of *Shiye danwei*, including television stations. Domestic television broadcasters were expected to realize self-funding after three years (Li 2006). The largest source of funding for Chinese television thereby shifted from government subsidy to commercial revenue. Selling advertising time became the major financial resource for television broadcaster to release such pressures (Zhang, 2002). As a result, audience ratings became a stimulus for television operators to improve their broadcasts and cater to the desires of the general public (Li, 2001).

With television in China becoming more autonomous in operation and diverse in ownership, in the later 1990s domestic television audiences had a wider choice of television broadcasting services (e.g. regional cable channels and free-to-air channels, domestic satellites channels and possible international satellites channels) and thus, more varied programme options. Moreover, the penetration of international satellite televisions into Mainland China since the mid 1990s has also contributed greatly to the expansion of the Chinese domestic television market by allowing both media operators and domestic viewers to quickly catch on to global trends. Although it has been illegal since 1993 to own any satellite dish without government permission in China, the situation of setting up a satellite dish for private usage is not easily controlled by the Chinese government. This has given the opportunity for more and more Chinese television viewers, in particular the so-called Chinese urban middle class, to watch various new forms of television programmes made in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and America, from available satellite television channels owned by international media corporations.

The long-time monopoly of CCTV in the domestic television market was ended with the founding of Phoenix Satellite Television in 1996 and the emergence of Hunan Satellite Channel in 1998. Since then provincial satellite channels began springing up in a competition for domestic market share. By the end of the 1990s, all provincial-level television stations launched their own satellite channels to reach nationwide audiences by the end of the 1990s. In theory, the domestic television market entered into a new stage of competition among domestic satellite channels (Zhang, 2002). However, as Keane (2004) argues, prior to 2001, “China’s nationalized broadcasters were not consolidated into competitive networks”, but rather operated according to geographic divisions (p.93). Local audience were more often watching local channels, partly due to long established viewing habits and partly attributable to the intimacy of local flavour and the pertinence of local content.

By early in the new millennium, China had a complex and hierarchical television

system with approximately 700 conventional television stations, about 3000 cable channels and over 30 satellite channels (Wang, Liu & Fore, 2005). The expansion of the domestic channels generated a high demand for television programmes to fill airtime. However, China's television market was still had tight controls over the importation quota of foreign programming and foreign firms were banned from broadcasting to China. In order to survive in the increasingly competitive domestic market, all levels of television stations had to be "market savvy". For instance, all satellite channels in 1990s scheduled for general interests. In the early 2000s, some provincial satellites made efforts to develop into specialist channels to pitch to the domestic market. Hunan Satellite TV ambitiously aimed to develop as a leading entertainment programme provider, Anhui Satellite TV attempted to build a reputation for being specialized in television dramas and Guangdong Satellite TV promoted the concept of "fortune" to match its status of an economic centre.

Chinese television broadcasters also retained their viewers by offering more popular programmes to fill the gaps. The increasing influence of Western television programming on the Chinese population via various means (e.g. direct importation of overseas finished programmes, international satellite channels, DVDs and internet downloading) stimulated a demand for better-quality local programmes. After years of rapid development, Chinese television broadcasters, in particular in major cities, were able to catch up with television networks in Western developed countries in aspects of technology and facilities, but programming was still a weak aspect (Zhang, 2002).

Keane (2004) identified the isomorphic nature of China's television. A television programme that succeeds in the local market is often followed with a number of imitators and replications which "do not just look alike, but are similar in name, design, and duration" (Keane, 2004, p.94). The excess of cloning shortens the longevity of a popular format as attested by the quick demise of many programmes. Moreover, driven by audience ratings, television programming, in particular

entertainment programmes, in China have displayed an explicit inclination towards commercialized television which demonstrates a narrow interest in selling advertising time (Zhang, 2002). The ‘vulgarization’ and commercialism of entertainment programming has been widely criticized by public commentators and scholars.

The commercialization of the television industry complicated the function of those state-operated televisions which presented a mixture of political instrument, public service and commercial broadcasting. Therefore, Chinese television makers are required to balance political commitment, social responsibility and entertainment value in their television productions. To a large extent, the influence of official discourse achieved through the televisual communication depends on television operators’ sophisticated management of the media.

Generally speaking, China’s entry into the WTO in 2001 has had an indirect impact on the majority of the television broadcasters who have been under the protection of media policies (Li & Zhang, 2002). To a large extent, state-owned television stations still have government support and a monopoly of the broadcasting platform. Many overseas television media operators who have abundant funds, sufficient programme resources and rich experience in international marketing operation are waiting for Chinese government to remove trade barriers and open up its economy, and its largely unexplored television market.

Compared with international competitors, the Chinese television system is still “amateurish”. The Chinese television industry has lacked a set of well-established norms, regulations and laws to discipline the market and trade. In the primary stage of the reform of television system, the many changes taking place in China have been forced by Chinese government’s imperatives rather than resulted from circumstances in the market. In the past decade, several provincial media conglomerates were formed in the major cities in China, including the Hunan Electronic Broadcasting, the Shanghai Media Group (SMG) and Beijing Radio, Film and Television Group

(BRFT), Southern Radio, Film and Television Group (SRFT). Those regional superstations have integrated local media resources (e.g. cable and free-to-air channels, television stations and propaganda bureau) to enhance their competitiveness in the domestic television market and also reinforce their monopoly in the regional television market. However, for those provincial-level stations located in the economically undeveloped regions, the continuously increased annual expense of landing satellite signals in other provinces has become a burden. As a result, the pattern of domestic satellite television market has been experiencing a reshuffle.

2.2 The Guangdong Television Market

Guangdong Television Station (GDTV) is one of the major provincial-level television stations and a leading regional television broadcaster who represents a high standard of professionalism in the aspect of personnel and equipment in the Chinese television industry (Li & Zhang, 2002). Located in the fast developing Pearl River Delta (PRD) economic zone² in the southeast of China, GDTV television makers face a relatively open and highly competitive local television market. GDTV's pioneering role in the provision of Chinese "Reality TV" can be attributed to both its unique regional television market and a particular cultural background.

Since China began to reform and open to the outside world in the early 1980s, neighbouring Hong Kong commercial broadcasters (TVB and ATV) have spilled over broadcasting signals to the Guangdong province. Several audience surveys in the earlier 1990s show that during the 1980s and 1990s Guangdong viewers preferred to watch Hong Kong commercial channels³. In particular two Cantonese-language Channels had attracted an audience of 18 to 25 million in Guangdong alone, roughly

² The Pearl River Delta geographically includes nine municipalities, namely Dongguan, Foshan, Guangzhou, Huizhou, Jiangmen, Shenzhen, Zhaoqing, Zhongshan and Zhuhai in Guangdong Province. Economically, the so-called the Pearl River Delta Economic Zone also comprises Hong Kong and Macau. This region has been in the forefront of Chinese economic reforms and social transformation.

³ They are the Cantonese-language Jade Channel (TVB), Home Channel (ATV), and the English-language Pearl Channel (TVB) and World Channel (ATV).

equal to a 70-80% share of the audience in Guangdong (Wang, 2007).

Before 1997 Hong Kong was a British colony. Hong Kong commercial television represented purely a capitalistic culture. Despite repeated attempts at prohibition, Guangdong government and television broadcasters found that it was futile to try to block the leaking Hong Kong television signals (Guo, 1997). In the late 1980s, Hong Kong television's broadcasting signals received tacit consent to transmit via local cable networks to local households. Such means made it easy for the local government to censor sensitive items in Hong Kong programmes, in particular the news (Chan & Chan, 1998).

Hong Kong is often recognized as a place where "East meets West". It not only functions as a global centre for international finance and trade, but also acts as a major export centre for popular culture, in particular to the Asian-Pacific region. Hong Kong commercial television plays an important role in forming/shaping the local Cantonese speaking population's viewing taste and in steering the trends of local television programming.

Competing for a local market share has been a part of the history of GDTV. Being the earliest television station established in China, GDTV demonstrated a powerful influence in the programming of China television in 1980s. In comparison to television broadcasters in other provinces, GDTV has been facing a relatively open television market. GDTV television professionals took advantage of their "living circumstances" and adopted a forward-thinking approach in their television programming. The unique media environment in Guangdong has provided opportunities for more direct and synchronous experiences of international television trends and for the introduction of updated television programming into the local market. As Producer Jian Zhao admits in an interview,

For many Chinese television professionals, they might need to go overseas

to experience the global television trends, but for Guangdong television practitioners, we can experience the new global television trends at home (personal communication, August 9, 2006).

Over the past three decades, GDTV makers have put significant efforts into creating new forms of television programming and made great contributions to domestic entertainment programming.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, referring to the experience of Hong Kong television, GDTV launched many programmes with popular appeal and became a paradigm for many other domestic television stations to imitate (Guo, 1997). Following the successful debut of a variety show called *Wanziqianhong* in 1981, GDTV launched a number of entertainment-oriented programmes in succession on its regionally broadcast channels, ranging from comedy shows, and game shows to sitcoms. Although there was a gap between the GDTV's productions and their Hong Kong commercial counterparts in the aspects of entertainment programming and production techniques, those locally-produced programmes were very popular among viewers living in Guangdong province in the 1980s and early 1990s.

With China's increasing contact with the outside world and the forming of a domestic satellite television market in 1990s, more and more local television broadcasters began actively engaging in making rating-friendly programmes by modelling the popular Hong Kong and Taiwanese television programmes to attract a large audience both locally and domestically. With the emergence of Hunan Satellite Television (HNSTV)⁴, GDTV's dominance in entertainment programming was no longer explicit.

In the last decade, GDTV has faced more fierce market competition. In the beginning

⁴ With the success launch of celebrities-involved game show *Happy Camp (Kuaile Dabenyi)* in 1998, Hunan Satellite TV became the flagshipping provincial television station in entertainment programme making in the late 1990s (Zhao & Guo, 2005). Like GDTV produced entertainment programmes, *Happy Camp* was also modelled on popular Hong Kong and Taiwanese variety shows (Keane 2003).

of the new millennium, Southern Media Groups as a regional media conglomerate, was formed to fight back a local market share by integrating and reconstructing local media resources. Local free-to-air and cable channels were consolidated to found the provincial-level Southern Television Station (TVS) in June 2001 for the purpose of enhancing the local television broadcaster's competitiveness. GDTV and TVS are positioned differently. The former caters to general interests and is responsible for constructing official discourse via news and various information-base programmes. The latter is concerned with specific local viewing interests and provides an entertainment service (Hua & Lu, 2006). Chan & Chan (1998) argues that mass media, including television "enjoy a different degree of freedom depending on its distance from the central power" (p.650). In this case, the distinctive arrangement indicates that as a leading provincial-level television station in the economic centre, GDTV is required to foreground its role as "the Party's propaganda apparatus" over "a profit-seeking enterprise" (p.650)

Shortly after China's entry into the WTO in 2001, the government started to grant global media giants, such as AOL and News Corporation, landing rights to directly broadcast to the Guangdong viewers. It was the first time in history that the Western media companies were allowed direct access to regular Chinese homes. Since then China has approved thirteen foreign satellite channels, such as China Entertainment TV, Star TV, Phoenix TV and MTV to broadcast signals to Chinese viewers through the local cable network (Zhong, 2001). However, so far Guangdong is the only province where foreign satellite channels are allowed access to regular Chinese homes. As a result, GDTV began to experience a real sense of global competition, in terms of competing for about 600,000 local households with dozens of regional, domestic and international channels⁵ (Hutzler and Kahn, 2003). This "Television Special Zone" acts as a testing area for both Chinese government and the overseas media operators

⁵ As the example of Guangzhou, households in the provincial capital city could receive 36 channels in 1999, including 30 domestic channels and 6 overseas channels. The number of television channels increased to 58 in 2004, including 13 channels of CCTV, 4 channels of GDTV, 6 channels of TVS, 8 channels of Guangzhou Television, 19 satellite channels of other provincial television networks and 8 overseas channels (Ou el, 2006).

(Hua & Lu, 2006).

Under market pressure, Guangdong producers have had to adopt more innovative programming to survive in an increasingly competitive environment. Inspired by the phenomenal success of the popular Japanese factual-based programme, *Airway Boys* (NTV, 1998) in Hong Kong ATV, GDTV professionals introduced this new form of programme into Mainland China in earlier 2000, to win back their long lost market share in Guangdong and to extensively attract domestic viewers.

2.3 Reality TV in China

“Reality TV” is arguably a type of Western-derived programming. At the beginning of the 21st century, domestic television viewers had several ways to access the new television trend. The majority of television viewers in Mainland China experienced the global “Reality TV” trend mainly through a group of locally produced popular global reality formats on domestic television channels and occasionally via Chinese dubbed and re-versioned original series, such as CBS’s *Survivor* on CCTV in 2001.

Domestic viewers can also access the global trend through international satellite channels. Many international media corporations and media companies realized the great potential of the attraction of Reality TV to both local Chinese viewers and overseas Chinese communities. For instance, Starry Sky, a popular satellite TV channel owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp produced many programmes based on Western concepts. There was a real-life police show called *Wanted! In China* (2001) which was modelled on the format *America’s most Wanted*. It was “co-produced with the Ministry of Public Security and shows real footage of Chinese police officers chasing criminals” (Hutzler & Kahn, 2002). There was also the long-term hit *TV Court* (2001-) which was a localized version of America’s popular reality courtroom series *Judge Judy*. This programme has reportedly reached 340 million television households in China (Forney, 2003). Although the coverage of

satellite television is still limited, the popularity of these programmes to some extent reinforces the acceptance of these new television formats. Chinese viewers demonstrated their interest in this new kind of factual television programme and appreciated the novelty of hybrid programming. To a large extent, these earlier localized reality programmes indicated the potential for attracting domestic viewers by applying more locally-relevant content to popular global television formats.

Between 2001 and 2004, *Survivor*-style formats were the mainstream reality strand dominating domestic television screens. After GDTV successfully launched the inaugural season of *TGCFs* series in the summer of 2000 through its domestically broadcasted satellite channel, a group of followers emerged in all levels of television channels. Some popular shows included *Into Shangri-La (Zouru xianggelila)* (Vhand, 2001), *Survival Camp in Canyon (Xigu Shengcunying)* (GZTV, 2003) and *Experiencing China (Tiyan zhongguo)* (CCTV, 2003). These programmes all adopted the formula of a group of contestants travelling to a remote area in China where they sought to accomplish various survival tasks within a set of restricted game rules.

The strand of outdoor survival-formats reached its peak in the domestic market in 2003. However, Chinese audiences soon became disenchanted with the excess of similar media products and they soon lost their initial curiosity and viewing interests. The relatively high production cost, low market value, and limited profitability of such formats in the growing competitive domestic television market meant that the majority of the *Survivor*-like local imitators appeared as one term productions. In 2004 and earlier 2005 Chinese reality television experienced a temporary stagnant period. It was not until China's flagship provincial television station, Hunan Satellite launched *Super Girls*, a spin-off of the pop *Idol* format (see Figure 4), in the summer of 2005 that China experienced a real sense of "Reality TV" cult. The phenomenal success of *Super Girls* made this local television production a high profile national media event and also attracted international attention.



Figure 4 *Super Girls* (2005)

The enormous marketing success of this localized pop *Idol*-format show again inspired many similar format programmes with a diversity of themes in the domestic television market. From 2006, various studio-based reality programmes about talent contest started to take over prime time in domestic television channels nationwide, including the male singer contest format CCTV's *Dream of China* (*Mengxiang Zhongguo*) (CCTV), Shanghai Dragon TV's *My Hero* (*Jiayou! Hao Naner*) and *My Show*, (*Woxing, woxiu*), and GDTV's *International Super Model Competition* and *Future Stars* (*Minri zhi xing*).

Reality formats not only have been used to create stars out of ordinary Chinese people, but also to enhance the stardom of celebrities both domestically and internationally (mainly from the Pan-Asian area). In the past few years, various celebrity based reality shows also have become very popular on Chinese television screens. *Dance! Dance!* (*Wulin Dahui*) (Shanghai Dragon TV, 2007), a spin-off of ABC's *Dance with the Stars* (2006-) and a Chinese adaptation of BBC's *Just the Two of Us* (*Minsheng Dazheng*) (HNSTV, 2007-) both achieved nationwide awareness.

Generally speaking, the development of "Reality TV" in China has drawn closer to Western trends. Chinese reality programming has become more and more diverse in its form and content. The mediascape was unlike years ago, where one trend dominated the marketing share. Various popular reality formats have been capable of generating wide public interest. For instance, the high-rating life-changing experience

format *Deformation Story (Bianxin ji)* (HNSTV, 2005-) basically takes two people out of their everyday environment and records how they cope with their new roles respectively within a given time frame. A Chinese imitation of *The Apprentice*, namely *Wise Man Takes it All (Chuangzhi Yinjia)* (Shanghai Dragon TV, 2005-) (see Figure 5) attracted a large audience of educated young urban residents to compete for a sizeable amount of funds to start their own business.



Figure 5 The second season of *Wise Man Takes it All* (2006)

By 2007, according to a BBC report, “TV stations across China [had] produced more than 500 reality shows, ranging from music to martial arts” (Feuilherade, 2007). Various reality formats have become the main staple of Chinese Television. The domestic “Reality TV” phenomenon has been named as *Quanmin Yule* (“entertainment for all”) and *Quanmin Kuanghuan* (“mass carnival”) by many Chinese media commentators. This newly-developed phrase suggests that Reality TV programmes have effectively generated a new wave of entertainment across-the-board. However, the popular entertainment-orientated talent show formats have also raised the concern of Chinese Government broadcast authorities over the blind imitation of Western trends and the “vulgar” idol worship generated by popular talent shows which involve massive audience participation.

Early this century, a Chinese attempt to emulate the *Big Brother* format, namely

*Perfect Vacation (Wanmei jiaqi)*⁶ (HNSTV & VHand, 2002) (see Figure 6) was banned half way through its production and broadcast cycle, by government media censors concerned about its catering to the “lowest common denominator” and undermining socialist values. Although the producer avoided a display of sex and voyeuristic pleasure, this series generated a wide social debate over the participants’ flirting, alliance and back stabbing. The show was labelled as “a disgusting life farce” by public commentators (Xie & Chen, 2007).



Figure 6 *Perfect Vacation* (2002)

The directive issued by the SARFT in March 2006 indicated that “all types of competitive activities should be positive, healthy, cheerful and have a favourable influence on morality” (UPI News Service, 2006). Based on this consideration, some extreme Western brands of reality-based humiliation, and alleged sexuality and voyeurism are not allowed to be shown on the television screen. Another example was Guangdong TV’s pioneering makeover reality show *Date with Beauty (Meilai Meili Xin Yue)* (GDTV, 2007) (see Figure 7) which was banned after seven months of screening by the General Bureau of National Broadcast in response to public complaints of its overexposure of horrifying images of plastic surgery.

⁶ Twelve ordinary people volunteered to live together in a villa for 70 days. 60 surveillance cameras carried out an around-the-clock recording of their daily lives. Weekly elimination was carried out among the roommates. The promised reward for the winner was an apartment which worth ¥ 500,000 (about US\$62,500).



Figure 7 *Date with Beauty* (2007)

In considering the great influence of television in shaping public opinion, the Chinese government has enacted regulations and established policies to ensure media content remains politically-aligned and ethically-appropriate, particularly in primetime television broadcasting. In August 2007, SARFT announced a series of new measures and provisional rulings to regulate all talent shows involving the mass public in mainland China. The government's first strike at "low taste" television programming was against a high rating talent format reality show, *First Heartbeat* (*Diyici xingdong*) (CQTV⁷, 2006). According to the official announcement, "the show has cheapened its overall tone in planning and supervision, where judges lack grace in their behaviour, contest design is coarse, and song selection lacks artistic standards" (Entertainment Asia, 2007). The *Shanghai Daily* newspaper reported that from October 1st 2007, talent shows could not be screened on air during the night prime-time hours 19:30 to 22:20 on domestic satellite channels (*Shanghai Daily*, 2008). However, the tension generated by the boom of reality programming did not last long.

In recent years, various Western popular reality formats have been continuously emerging in domestic television screens. Western reality series such as *Project Runway*, *Hell's Kitchen*, *Amazing Race* and *The Biggest Loser* have been aired in prime time television. These examples demonstrate that reality programming is still appealing to Chinese viewers, in particular urban young viewers. They appear to have

⁷ Chongqing Television Station (CQTV) is a provincial level television station located in the southeast of China.

a desire to purchase stardom, and are the clear target consumers for advertisers. However, it is obvious that the production approach to the subject of Chinese reality programming often follows cultural and ethical frameworks.

It can be said that the multi-functional nature of political unit, cultural instruction and business enterprise embodied by state-operated television stations determines that the local television practitioners have had to deal with a highly complex set of practices and dynamics of political frameworks, social responsibilities and commercial imperatives in respect to making globally controversial “Reality TV” formats.

2.4 Some Important Issues Concerning Chinese Television Reform

In order to understand the complex production context of Chinese reality programme, it is also necessary to address some important issues that have emerged during the reform period of Chinese television media and industry.

2.4.1 Television Entertainment

The entertainment orientation of Chinese television media emerged in the early 1990s. In the last decade, entertainment programmes have become the main staple of television media. In order to build revenue, many factual-based programmes which have traditionally belonged to the non-entertainment category, began to demonstrate an entertainment orientation, such as news and documentary (Li, 2006).

In the earlier years of Chinese academic studies on Western imported Reality TV, these factual-based programmes were categorized as entertainment programmes. Chinese scholar Dan Yu, one of the Chinese media scholars who contributed to the public and academic discussions about the new breed of programme, summed up the development of Chinese entertainment programmes into four stages (2003). The first stage contained the studio-based variety shows that emerged at the beginning of the

1990s. In the celebrity-centred second stage aesthetics and passive audience positioning were the main characteristics of entertainment programmes. This kind of studio-based entertainment was staged to provide a variety of forms of art performance (singing, dancing, magic, acrobats and etc.).

Around the mid 1990s, game shows became the dominant entertainment trend. The successful launch of *Happy Camp (Kuaile a benying)* (HNSTV, 1997) in the newly-emerged flagship provincial satellite channel, Hunan Satellite Channel, signals the beginning of the cult of television entertainment (Li, 2006). *Happy Camp* was modelled on the style and form of Hong Kong and Taiwan entertainment programming which invited pop singers and TV stars to play games in the studio. This kind of entertaining game show made a great contrast to the orthodox style of variety shows and won a large audience.

Television entertainment in China reached its second peak in the new century, as quiz shows become popular on domestic television screens and this trend was closely followed by the emergence of “Reality TV”, mainly the “survival challenge” format, of reality programme at the beginning of the new millennium which involved both gambling and infotainment.

With the rapid growth of the national economy and the upgrading of people’s living standards particularly in urban areas, mass audiences’ interests, needs and expectations changed in concert with their socio-economic circumstances. There was an increasing demand for entertainment oriented programmes, and the commercialization of the television industry in the mid 1990s encouraged television programmers to consider this new audience. As a result, the content of television media became more popularized and televisual presentations became more varied and entertaining (Li, 2006). In 2001, a variety of entertainment programmes and serialized television drama altogether occupied about half of the market share (Li 2006,)

Zhang (2002) argues that since 1990 television has become the premier medium in China. For the Party and state, television is the ‘mouth-piece’; whereas for the masses, it is both a site for pleasure and a classroom (p.2). These comments indicate that television has become a resource for both entertainment and information access for the Chinese viewer. The common interests of the mass audience are identified as being about livelihoods, novelty, entertainment, fashion, and change (Li 2006, p.100).

2.4.2 A Social Interest in Ordinary People

The popularity of Reality TV suggests that the audience has a great interest in factual-based programmes and interest in watching ‘real people’s real lives revealed on screen. This pattern can also be found in documentary programming in the 1990s. The New Documentary Movement claims to have concerns for marginalized social sub-groups and for the life circumstances of the grass-root social stratum and for examining ordinary people’s lives from their perspective (Lü, 2003).

The social interest in featuring ordinary people’s life stories was substantially formed with the proliferation of factual-based television programmes in China in the 1990s. Some earlier influential high rating new magazine programmes, including *Focus* (*Jiaodian fangtan*) (CCTV, 1993-) and *Oriental* (*Dongfang shikong*) (1994-), and Shanghai TV’s *Documentary Edit Room* (1994) all helped to promote the popular idea of “telling stories about ordinary people” (*Jiangshu laobaixing ziji de gushi*). These were originally elicited by CCTV’s magazine programme *Life Space* (*Shenghuo Kongjiang*)⁸ (CCTV, 1993 -).

Since the 1990s, China television has become more open to ordinary people and more liberalized in terms of expression. CCTV’s new investigation programme *Focus* (1993) was the pioneer, in terms of exercising supervision by (and of) public opinion.

⁸ This is a magazine programme presenting everyday people’s living circumstance. A segment of this programme, namely “telling stories about ordinary people” (*Jiangshu laobaixing ziji de gushi*). This title eventually became a popular slogan widely promoted by similar types of programme made nationwide.

Although most of its content accords to political indicatives, *Focus* more or less touched upon some politically sensitive issues in its news investment. Li (2001) argues that “[t]he program symbolizes an attempt to test public opinion and the receptivity of government to criticism in a more open society and in a more economically competitive environment” (p.21).

From then on the public space previously dominated by the political/cultural elite stratum now became more widely open to everyday people and consequently their stories become a part of the cultural discourse. In the late 1990s, human interest stories were widely exploited by various factual-based programmes, such as talk shows, life-style shows and crime/law enforcement programmes. By the end of the 1990s, television in China had become more socially relevant. The everyday lives of average Chinese were treated as an important resource for provoking public debate and providing mass entertainment.

In the new century, with the emergence of “Reality TV”, Chinese were more encouraged to speak out about their concerns, to share their stories and to participate in media events in a variety of factual-based entertainment programmes (including reality programmes). Featuring ordinary people has become a popular strategy for connecting with the interests of domestic or local viewers.

2.4.3 Political Culture

The commercialization of television production “has led to a focus on entertainment, which has become a target for criticism from many of China’s conservative intellectuals” (Keane, 2002, p.80). Applying the logic of the market economy to media production is often viewed as potentially threatening to the controlling position of official ideology (the values of heroism, collectivism and socialism) and as encouraging Western capitalistic values (typically seen as equated with hedonism, individualism and consumerism) (Xie, 1996, Keane, 2002 and Yin, 2002). This kind

of speculation represents a widespread social concern about the potential impact of Western cultural influence on Chinese media. There is no doubt that in contemporary China the policies associated with political power, cultural forces, and economic motivations are experiencing a re-shuffle in search of a new balance.

In China, there are two different readings of the concept of the commercialization of Chinese television. Some believe that “commercial interests will liberalize television and minimize Party propaganda”, whereas others consider that “the process of commercialization can also enhance Party propaganda⁹” (Zhong, 2001, p.169). It can be argued that although a reduction of government subsidies to state-owned media enterprises had spurred greater media autonomy in fund raising and programming, the emergence of a commercial mindset among media managers did not end government’s control of the media system and ideology. In the days of commercialization, television as a news medium in China has continuously functioned as “state apparatus, providing guidance, propaganda, and education” (Chan & Chan 1998, p.650). In the meantime, Western business models and management practices were introduced to enhance the commercial attributes of these state-owned and Party-run television institutions.

The establishment of market competition has invigorated local television producers to prioritize concern for the mass audience’s needs of entertainment and to provide diversified programmes to satisfy the growing complexity of television viewing tastes (Weber, 2002). At the same time, however, ideological control of the media content is functioning to maintain a 'healthy' entertainment culture. It is worth reiterating that the principal directors and other officers of the television station are appointed by the

⁹ In the process of foregrounding consumer needs in the media industry, Chinese politicians have learned to compromise with the entertainment atmosphere of the mainstream media on the issue of political propaganda for the purpose of obtaining public awareness. The propagandists’ construction of political discourse often attempts to achieve an effect of *Yujiao yule* which is the idea of making an educational subject entertaining. Since the 1990s, “mainstream melody” works in television and cinema have taken this kind of approach to enhance their social influence (Yin 2000). Zhong (August, 2001) argues that “there is evidence showing that business and Party interests can coexist and benefit each other” (p.168).

State.

2.4.4 Party publicity Inc.,

Zhou He (2003) described those state-owned and Party-run television stations as “Party Publicity Inc.” He argues that media in Mainland China now “engage in promoting the legitimacy of the ruling party while making a profit” (p.197). His speculations indicate that government control is still very much in evidence in the increasingly commercialized television industry, and although the self-financing system encourages the manager of a television station to be enterprising, this marketing strategy was not adopted in order to replace political dominance, but additionally, to improve economic strength. Television stations still function to “promote the positive image of the Party-state” (Lee, 2003, p.18) and are “discouraged from playing a quasi-oppositional role against the government and top leadership” (Li, 2001). Parodying politicians may be common in Western entertainment programming, but is not a workable subject in China television programmes. The broadcasting channels have been tightly held by Chinese Party-state owned networks.

Despite China’s entry into the WTO in 2001, for example, the Party-state did not release its control over media content through censorship and broadcasting channels via ownership (Li, 2001). The television value chain is still subject to oversight from institutional bodies, including SARFT¹⁰ and local propaganda bureaus (Redl and Simon, 2002). No matter whether they are producing programming or purchasing foreign programming, those organizations all have to operate “under the guidelines of avoiding programs with violent, pornographic, or anti-government content” (Weber, 2002, p.67).

¹⁰ SARFT is an abbreviation of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television which used to call the Ministry of Film, Radio and Television.

It is the expectation of the Party that mainstream media act as gatekeepers of the public spirit “whose task is to promote the positive image of the Party-state” (Lee, 2003, p.18) and “the Government’s vision of a socialist commodity economy” (Weber, 2002, p.58). Therefore, in an increasingly competitive local television market, Chinese television practitioners now have to face the challenge of balancing the multiple roles of television: as an ideological instrument for the government; as a public service provider and as an advertising revenue generator in an increasingly competitive local television market.

2.5 Conclusion

The contents of this chapter are crucial for the understanding of the complex production context of a Chinese reality programme. Many issues will be revisited and discussed further in later chapters while examining the production agenda of the studied case in details. The following chapter explains the theoretical framework applied to this research subject which can further enhance an understanding of the unique features of the Chinese television media discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Frameworks

With the launch of *TGCF*S in July 2000, a group of outdoor survival-based challenge hybrid programmes made their way into the mainstream of Chinese television of the early 2000s. Although Chinese television media was tightly controlled and regulated by the state, the emergence of Chinese Reality TV did not lag behind the Western-derived global reality trend. This can partly be attributed to the rapidly growing pace of the Chinese media industry, the reform of the Chinese television system and the significant influence of global culture on domestic urban viewers. However, the localization of the global format was a result of China's unique media environment, socio-political circumstances, cultural traditions and ethical values, its development track, and reflects many distinctive Chinese characteristics both in its content and format.

This chapter clarifies the generic confusion around the conception of Reality TV and its alternatives, 'popular factual programme' and documentary hybrids. Then the chapter reviews the mainstream Western and Chinese studies on Reality TV and outlines the key theoretical frameworks drawn upon for this research project.

3.1 Defining Reality TV

Nowadays, Reality TV probably has become the most common term used in western countries to label popular fact-fiction programmes. In order to avoid critical confusion, it is necessary to clarify the concept of "Reality TV" applied to these formats. Reality TV is a broad category of hybrid entertainment television programmes featuring real people and crossing "border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama" (Hill, 2005, p.2). From the stunt/dare reality game show *Fear Factor* (NBC, 2001-2006) to the "hands-on-history" reality series *Frontier House* (PBS, 2002), a wide range of popular factual-based formats are labelled as

Reality TV and discussed in the context of new television phenomenon. *Fear Factor* represents one stand of reality programming which has been criticized as “Trash TV”. This kind of television product is often devoted to winning the battle for ratings by providing trivial and controversial content to the public. Whereas, *Frontier House* stands for an alternative stand of reality programming which demonstrates more informative and educational values, and more importantly share more patterns with conventional documentary making.

In this thesis, the term “Reality TV” is adopted for the benefit of referring to a wide range of public commentaries, academic writings and interviews both in English and Mandarin. It is worth noting that a Chinese direct translation of “Reality TV” should be “factual television”; whereas “zhen ren xiu” should be “reality show”, because “Zhen ren” means “real people”, and “xiu” is an imported word for “show”. The emergence of the term “real people show” is associated with the Hollywood film *The Truman Show*¹(1992) (CCTV & Tsinghua University). The word “Truman” implies a “real person”, while the term “show” is technically associated with ideas of performance, staging and entertainment with specific connotations in the Chinese context.

Mixing fiction and non-fiction in television programmes is not an entirely new phenomenon. As Corner (August 2002) argues, the “generic system is not, as we know, a neat and stable set of discrete categories of work” (p.255). Historically, both documentarians and fictional film/television programme makers have attempted to explore new approaches to an established genre by breaking its boundaries or blurring the line between the territories of fact and fiction. On the one hand, documentary practice extensively applies staged performance and/or digital techniques to serve for the needs of reconstructing real happenings in the past or to visualize possible scenarios of the future. On the other hand, the emergence of docu-drama and

¹ It is a story about a young man named Truman who has been living in an entirely staged life since birth without realising.

mockumentary testifies to the “extensive borrowing of the ‘documentary look’” (Corner, 2002, p.263) by fictional filmmakers to challenge viewers.

Blending a non-fictional style into a fictional presentation often generates audience confusion about genre identities and challenged their. Some earlier popular television programmes had already signalled the tendency for hybridity in factual-based television programming, including the voyeuristic-based *Candid Camera* (premiered 1948, CBS, 1996-2000), real-life crime series *Cops* (Fox, 1989-) and the viewer contribution show *America’s Funniest Home Videos* (ABC, 1990-). However it was not until the late 1990s that Reality TV became a media phenomenon receiving unprecedented public notice. The focus in this research particularly is on those generic mixed television programmes made in the early 2000s.

The other frequently used term is “popular factual television programme”. The term ‘factual television programme’ refers to “a relatively broad spectrum of programmes, ranging from the softer reality formats to the more serious heavy weight documentary” (Kilborn, 2003, p.5). Not all alleged ‘factual television programmes’ necessarily display hybrid traits. Likewise, ‘documentary hybrid’ is a more neutral term frequently used within academia, but this is not used to label a particular genre, rather it serves as a shorthand for identifying a large range and variety of television programmes; those which focus on presenting ‘real people’s real lives’ and are derived from both conventional documentary and artificial television genres, such as game shows and soap operas.

The terms of Reality TV, “documentary hybrids“ or “popular factual television programme” encompass a variety of specialized formats or subgenres (Hill 2005).

For instance, 'gamedoc' is one of the most popular subgenres. In typical examples like *Survivor* (CBS, 2000 -) and *Big Brother* (Endemol, 1999 -) it consists of a mixture of game show format with documentary style. However, in contrast to conventional documentary’s dedication to record natural events and to present “an unmediated

truth”, the gamedoc often simulates an imaginary situation, places real people in it and records the results (Mapplebeck, 2002). The utilization of documentary modes and camera surveillance in gamedocs is often for the purpose of constructing a sense of directly encountering the “truth” through a staged media event. Those two heavily studied gamedocs have set the template for other spin-offs. Some elements, such as game play, rewards, competition and eviction have been widely shared by many contest-based new formats, such as talent contest formats (e.g. *American Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars* and *American Got Talent*) .

Docusoap is another earlier established subgenre of reality television originating in the UK in late 1990s. As in the examples *Airport* (1996) and *Driving School* (1997), docusoap often shows the personal lives of ‘ordinary people’ at their workplace. It mixes a fly-on-the-wall documentary style of presentation with a resemblance of soap opera in its narrative structure.

There are also various lifestyle formats (*Super Nanny* and *Wife Swap*); dating shows (e.g. *Joe Millionaire* and *The Bachelor Beauty and the Geek*), the makeover formats (e.g. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Extreme Makeover*) , reality sitcoms (e.g. *Osbournes* and *The Simple Life*); court programme *Judge Judy*, business series *The Apprentice*, life experiment format *The 1900 House* and many other subgenres. Hill (2005) argues that

What ties together all the various formats of the reality TV genre is their professed abilities to more fully provide viewers an unmediated, voyeuristic, and yet often playful. Look into what might be called the “entertaining real.” This fixation with “authentic” personalities, situations, problems, and narratives is considered to be reality TV’s primary distinction from fictional television and also its primary selling point. (p.5).

Over the last decade, television viewers worldwide have witnessed the dramatic proliferation of reality formats and have developed an understanding of the codes these formats employ. Hill’s studies on the audience of reality television indicates that

“viewers have certainly been well trained in the ways of reality TV since its initial emergence and are therefore quite savvy and sceptical when it comes to how much is actually “real” in these programs” (p.5). Reality TV is continuously undergoing evolution and expansion. Some formats are eliminated by market competition, some formats survive longer and new formats keep emerging. This globally shared pattern of development can be identified in China. However, local academic studies lag behind the current development of Chinese Reality TV. Therefore, the theoretical frameworks of this research mainly rely on Western studies on the new television phenomenon.

3.2 Western Studies on Reality TV

Over the last decade Western studies have contributed a large number of broadly mainstream western academic studies on various new television formats. A variety of perspectives from diverse theoretical approaches together provides a profile of the Reality TV phenomenon and offers an insight into the changes of television culture in a global context. Media scholars’ discursive concerns about new television forms from the aspects of genre, industry, culture and interactivity, provide rich contents to speculate about “the changing meanings of public service, democracy, and citizenship in the age of neoliberalism, deregulation, conglomeration, and technological convergence” (Murray and Ouellette, 2009, p.9).

One of the popular discussions has been centred on the authenticity of representation in the reality programmes. As Holmes & Jermyn (2004) point out, in the overall response to the wave of reality programmes first emerging in the Western media in the beginning of this century, “central to popular debates over Reality TV, as well as existing academic work in the field, has been a consideration of its relationship with documentary” (p.17). This focus is important to the study of the pioneer documentary hybrid programme in China due to the strong background of documentary making in

the studied Chinese case¹⁰.

In the West, reality programmes often attempt to exploit some explicit kind of kinship with the traditional documentary genre by displaying a documentary look through their premise of documenting ‘ordinary’ people’s ‘real life’ and through their wide usage of documentary codes and conventions. The terms ‘observational documentary’, ‘fly-on-the-wall’ and ‘real-life-soap’ (Clark, 2002, p.1) are often used by the Reality TV producer to promote a show, and stimulate audience assumptions that they are watching a documentary. These patterns are widely shared in Chinese reality production and promotion. Likewise, many issues raised in this case study also echo the contradictory critical debates among Western scholars and public commentators generated by the complexity of the hybrid nature of new factual-based formats.

The central arguments from a documentary perspective largely focus on the construction of “the real” in documentary hybrids (Dovey, 2000). The key issues include the obligations of investigating objective truth versus looking for staged spectacle; the functions of publicity and education versus filling the television schedule and delivering light entertainment; and the stance of representing institutional knowledge versus generating sensational engagement and voyeuristic pleasure. To many sceptics, a documentary hybrid form is “as constructed, rehearsed and polished as any other form of mass entertainment, catering for voyeurs along the way” (Barnfield, 2002, p.50). Clark (2002) asserts that “the less authentic the production, the more the presentation will bang on about ‘unprecedented access’ and feign ‘reality’” (p.1). (A related discussion can be found in Chapter Six while explaining the conflict of interests among the *TGCFs* production crew in an exercise of balancing dramatic effects and documentary approach.)

3.2.1 Some Problematic Approaches to the Reality TV Phenomenon

¹⁰ This point is discussed in detail in section 5.1 of Chapter Five.

Noticeably, much of the earlier research on fact-fiction television programmes has reflected pessimistic views of the trend of new television formats and concern with the possibility of new formats subverting the general assumptions of traditional documentary. Some earlier arguments described “the reality-based specials as ‘ratings crack’ – a cheap, addictive, short-lived high” (Andrejevic, 2004, p.7) and predicted “Reality TV was just a passing fad in light entertainment and should not be taken seriously” (Cummings, 2002, p. xvi). Nichols in *Blurring the Boundaries* (1994) argues that the emergence of Reality TV, in its first-generation form of real-crime programming, signals “the death of documentary”, because it “eliminates the historical consciousness of the documentary mode” (cited in Kavka & West, 2004, pp.137-138). However, Reality TV as a new television form has not only survived but has become a popular staple for global television broadcasting networks.

Reality TV has also been widely criticized for debasing public taste, referring to Dovey’s (2000) comment that “[d]umbing down’ and ‘trash TV’ are terms which automatically set up totalizing value judgements about the popular cultural landscape” (p.14). Many reality programmes have been criticized for “offering a mixture of banality and emotional pornography” (Barnfield, 2002, p.47). There is also the charge that the content of much reality programming is often “trivial, the product of kinds of irresponsibility (a slippage of values in ethics, tastes and social judgement) among the programme-makers” (Corner, 2004, p.293), such as encouraging people to “make fools of themselves for the camera” (Cummings, 2000, p.xvi) and asking contestants to conduct inhumane tasks (for example “eating huge live white maggots; competing to standing the longest on the end of a log fixed upright in a lagoon” [Dunkley, 2002, p.43] in *Survivor*)

As Roscoe and Hight (2001) indicate, “the ‘nervousness’ surrounding its blurring of genre boundaries and manipulation of ‘the real’ in particular has something of a tradition in critical debates surrounding the medium” (cited in Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, p.10). With the collapse of television authority (the top-down relationship

between the broadcaster and the mass audience), the function of television as public service broadcasting has gradually lightened with commercialization of the Western television broadcasting system intensifying in the later 1990s. As Holmes & Jermyn (2004) noted, “the discussion of contemporary television media is often associated with the discourses of ‘quality’ and cultural value since the increased commercialization and deregulation of television throughout the 1990s” (p.9). Reality TV as newly emerged television forms “have been criticized from their inception for their ‘tabloid TV’ format, their problematic mixture of the public and the private, and the blurring of the boundaries between information and entertainment” (Hill, 2000, p. 131). The more pessimistic commentators view “such developments as the latest attempt by television broadcasting (and other media) institutions to pursue a narrow commercialist agenda, and as the abandonment of the high standard demanded by a public-service ethic” (Hight, 2004, p.244). Dovey (2000) has pointed out that “The shift from [BBC pioneer Sir John Reith]’s ‘education, inform and entertain’ to ‘inform, titillate, gross out and fascinate’ is significant” (p.17).

These kinds of perspectives are widely shared by Chinese media scholars and public commentators in evaluating reality programming in China. Nevertheless, there are some problems with these pessimistic critics and commentators’ analytic approaches and judgements. They often derive their analysis of the dynamic and negotiable fact-fiction hybrids from a relatively restricted theoretical framework and confine their evaluation of new hybrids to within a static historical view of conventional documentary as an elite genre and television as public service broadcasting. In fact, at least three major aspects need to be considered while studying documentary hybrids. Firstly, the context of contemporary television media needs to be examined, including the aspects of the economic-political changes within television broadcasting systems, the advancement of new media technologies and the consequent democratization of television media. Secondly, it is important to be aware of the internal transformation of the traditional documentary genre, in terms of the foregrounding of subjective perspectives, the constant testing of generic boundaries

and the shrinking of funding systems. Thirdly, the various viewing strategies of the new generation of audiences, such as the multimedia interactivity of hybrids such as *Big Brother*, the emotional engagement hybrids construct and the omniscient viewing stance which they offer, also need to be taken into account.

3.2.2 Two Important Theoretical Speculations

As the Reality TV trend is growing stronger and becoming diversified in the global television market, more and more scholars have begun to take the new cultural phenomenon seriously. Over the past decade, Reality TV has been increasingly reviewed as providing a set of new energies, which function to reshape the cultural, economic and socio-political patterns long established before commercial forces took over the orientation of media industries worldwide.

Over the last decade, Dovey's discussion about 'media democracy' and Corner's suggestion of moving into a 'postdocumentary' culture have laid the groundwork for a perspective on the emergence of Reality TV in the Western academia.

Dovey (2000) speculates that the fact-fiction television programme is evidence of "a wider 'democratization' of television" (p.83), in terms of presenting 'ordinary' people's life and letting so-called working class' voices be heard. He further argues that the position of ordinary people on the television medium has been elevated by the programme-makers and broadcasters (p.83). The role of television has been gradually shifting from a focus on public service broadcasting, to an open cultural space in which previously private events and issues are regularly addressed and discussed in a public medium.

Corner (2002) has raised the possibility of living in a "postdocumentary" culture. He claims that the proliferation of fact and fiction television forms in contemporary television media does not mean "the death of documentary" (Nichols, 1994), but

signals “the scale of its relocation as a set of practices, forms and functions” (p. 265). He argues that “the commingling of performance with naturalism is a defining element of what he calls television’s ‘postdocumentary context’” (Murray and Ouellette, 2009, p.7).

This research has attempted to take these two influential conceptions as part of its the theoretical framework to study the emergence of Reality TV in a Chinese context. Corner and Dovey both adopt more dynamic views towards the new media phenomenon, in comparison to the ritual laments about the declining of social and moral standards and a violation of the general assumptions of traditional documentary (Hight, 2004, Kavka & West, 2004, and Nichols, 1994). Instead of simply using pre-established genre and media assumptions to frame the new hybrid forms, these two theorists emphasize “how the new factual formats have been shaped by changes in broadcasting institutions and in the wider media environment” (Kilborn, 2003, p.1). Corner and Dovey’s critical approaches reflect the consideration of both the internal transformation of the traditional documentary genre and the external influence of contemporary social-political reality and cultural backgrounds.

Corner’s argument is "based on a number of perceived shifts in the space occupied by ‘factual’ programming on television" (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, p.2). Firstly, the ongoing fundamental changes within the agenda of the documentary genre need to be considered. The trend of combining various entertaining forms with the elements of documentarism to present tele-factuality echoes the increasingly blurred boundary between fictional and nonfictional genres, which has complicated the rules for recognizing a documentary (Corner, 2002).

Secondly, the weakening status of television as public service broadcasting caused by across-the-board commercialization of the western television broadcasting system is a sign of a functional change in the medium. Corner’s idea of “documentary as diversion” suggests an extensive function of ‘postdocumentary’ as a vehicle for

delivering “popular factual entertainment”. Hybridity embedded in new types of documentary, “documentary as diversion”, signals “Corner’s description of a move from use value (social significance) to exchange value (a consumer’s product)” (Mathijs, 2002, p.311).

Finally, the ongoing democratization of television media has led to the collapse of divisions between private and public space. The foregrounding of subjectivity and documentary practices in favour of emotional knowledge signals the end of documentary’s association with “discourses of sobriety” (Nichols, 1991, p.4). However Corner has suggested that ‘postdocumentary culture’ appears to be technological-driven and market-oriented. He concludes that the biggest future challenge to documentary would ultimately come from the genre’s requirement to “reorienting and refashioning itself in an audio-visual culture where the dynamics of diversion and the aesthetics of performance dominate a greatly expanded range of popular images of the real” (Corner, 2002, p.267).

Dovey (2000) suggests that the new hybrid form “has become a new and crucial component of the fabric of popular culture” (p.78), which possibly “reflects a broader transformation of television as a medium” (Cummings, 2002, p.xvi). As Hight (2004) has summarized,

Dovey (2000) has been more detailed in his speculations, using the term ‘emotional democracy’ (p.168) to suggest a society which, among other attributes, increasingly values the emotional resonance of other people’s experiences over the knowledge offered by social and political institutions. The erasure of boundaries between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’, the acknowledgement of performance and the playful reflexivity that exist to varying degrees within different examples of hybrid programming are all seen as potential signs of such a transformation (p.249).

‘Emotional truth’ has been foregrounded with the rise of ‘first person media’. “The new dominance of various forms of first person speech suggests fundamental changes in the continuing status of a public sphere in which statements were assumed to be

addressed by and to the first person plural, from ‘we’ to ‘us’” (Dovey, 2002, p.103). The emotional truth presented in new documentary hybrids may construct a new “sense of openness and honesty within the media text itself” (p.50). Similarly, Corner (August, 2002) also sees the “structure of feeling” (Raymond Williams’s phrase) bringing new energy to the documentary (p.256)

It is worth noting that Corner explains his idea of moving into ‘post-documentary’ culture as a possibility and negotiation of reality rather than a conclusion or a finding. As Hight (2004) points out, “Corner intends to use the term ‘post-documentary’ to promote debate over hybrids, rather than necessarily to identify a definitive break with the genre itself” (p.250). Likewise, Dovey’s view of “emotional democracy” is presented as his speculation of contemporary media. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to use the postdocumentary theory to inspire critical thinking about the new documentary hybrid forms rather than relying on it as a proven fact.

3.2.3 Recent Western Studies on Reality TV

Murray and Ouellette (2009) argue that “a closer look at reality TV forces us to rethink the changing meanings of public service, democracy, and citizenship in the age of neo-liberalism, deregulation, conglomeration, and technological convergence” (p.7). Foucault’s concept of governmentality inspires many Western scholars to reconsider the claim of “reality TV ‘democratizes’ culture by inviting the masses into the historically guarded realm of cultural production” (Murray and Ouellette, 2009, p.18). The heavily studied *Survivor* format is discussed as a game of group governance. Participants volunteer to take part in the exercise of surveillance and self-monitoring; whereas audiences enjoy the new experience of interactivity which is involved in these voyeuristic practices (Andrejevic, 2004).

The popularity of lifestyle formats and makeover formats has also attracted many scholars' attention (Sender and Sullivan 2008, Palmer 2008, and Ouellette and Hay 2008). Based on a textual analysis of two lifestyle formats, *The Biggest Loser* and

What Not to Wear, Sender and Sullivan (2008) analyze the problematic representation and treatment of obese people on these shows in the USA. Palmer (2008), in an edited volume, closely examines a range of reality-based lifestyle programmes both in UK and abroad and questions the myth of neoliberalism in the contemporary Western society. His book *Exposing Lifestyle Television: The Big Reveal*, exposes the economic, cultural and political forces behind the conception of personal and lifestyle transformation. Ouellette and Hay (2008) identify the exercise of governance embedded in the programming of makeover formats. They argue those self-help formats encourage audiences to process self governance with a promise of improving their daily lives. Therefore, those reality formats can be viewed as reinventing an educational public service function. The participatory games and tutorials in the shows are cultural technologies used to train their citizens to take responsibility for their own lives in the Western society. This study opens up an interesting discussion in regards to the question of whether reality television advance the procedures of democracy or whether this new television phenomenon is merely what Hartley calls “democrataintment” (Hartley, 2008).

It is noticeable that reality formats in the USA and Western Europe countries have received most attention from Western scholars and public commentators. In the last few years, an increasing number of scholars around world have contributed academic studies on the Reality TV phenomenon in the Middle East (Kraidy, 2007), Africa (Jacobs, 2007), Asian Pacific regions (Hobart, 2006), South America (Murray and Ouellette, 2009) and Scandinavia (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2009). A range of popular Western derived reality formats and successfully localized reality programmes has been discussed in different regional context to address the public discourses of globalization, regionalization, localization, democratization and neo-liberalism.

Based on the case study of three popular reality programmes in the Arab world, including *Super Star* (which is the Arab version of *Pop Idol*), *Star Academy* (which is the Arab version of *Frame Academy*) and *Al Ra'* (which is the Arabic version of *Big*

Brother), Marwan M. Kraidy (2007 & 2009) analyzed the interaction between Reality TV and politics in the Arab World and examined the controversy surrounding the social and political impact of Arab reality television on the democratic process in the Middle East focusing on the aspects of religion, ethics and gender. Sean Jacobs (2007) studied the Big Brother Africa phenomenon in the south of the Sahara and fills the gap for a mainstream analysis of the Reality TV phenomenon in the Africa context, This case study of a continental series in Africa raised a number of complex issues in relation to the economic relations between countries, the politics of race and class and discourses of nationalism. Murray and Ouellette (2009) discuss the impact of Reality TV on the transformation of television culture in the Latin America. In response to the issue of standardization of media content through globalization, this study identifies the strong influence of local and national culture on the content of localized formats. Hobart's (2006) studies on reality formats in Indonesia reveals the public discourse and the concerns of political elites in response to the booming popularity of the real-life crime shows and supernatural reality formats between 2002 and mid-2005 in domestic television. Zala Volcic & Mark Andrejevic (2009) researched the production and reception of a *Big Brother*-style Balkan reality TV show, named *To Sam Ja (That's Me)*, featuring ordinary people from former Yugoslavian republics living together in 2004 and 2005. This research on a 'multicountry' reality series analyses how the show manages political and economic conflicts to address its Balkan audience.

Altogether these studies provide an overview of the localization and regionalization of the popular reality formats and the impact of such cultural practices on different geographic regions. The outcomes enrich the mainstream analyses of the reality TV phenomenon and provide a template for the study of the global television phenomenon in different regional contexts.

3.3 Studies on Chinese Realty TV

Generally speaking, there has been an absence of in-depth research on Chinese Reality production in Western publications. In China, although the public commentaries and scholarly writing about Reality TV seems adequate in number, there has been a perceived lack of substantial academic research on local reality production. In the past decade, there have been only two published books on this subject available and the content has been focused more on textual analysis and speculations about the Reality TV phenomenon. Overall, compared with the prosperity of the development of Reality TV in the past decade, academic research and theory building seems thin on the ground.

In the West, the production of Chinese documentary hybrids has been occasionally reported in the works of Western scholars studying contemporary Chinese media. In the early 2000s, Michael Keane's (2003) study of Chinese television formats and Jerry Clode's (2003) argument for the reform of Chinese television industry provided for Western readers a taste of the reality outputs in emerging China. With the phenomenal success of the second season of *Super Girls* in China in 2005, Western media coverage of Chinese popular Reality shows has started to increase. Public commentaries on the current development of Chinese reality formats can be found in a wide range of Western mainstream media coverage.

In China, for familiar reasons such as language barriers and a lack of direct access to the Western mainstream media, Chinese scholarly contributions to the study of reality formats and their participation of the theoretical debates on the global media phenomenon have been very limited. My bilingual skills and overseas study experience help solve problems of access to Western academic writing on Reality TV, watching Western reality programmes and updating public debates. By 2003, Chinese public commentators and media scholars had produced many articles about Reality TV to build public knowledge about the global new television trends. Overseas popular formats such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother* have been the most frequently addressed Western formats that are often compared with Chinese-produced

survival-based formats, both the outdoor and indoor productions.

By reading a large number of both Western and Chinese scholarly writings about Reality TV, I found some different interests and emphasis between the two. In the West, as Holmes & Jermyn (2004) have argued, the “central to popular debates over Reality TV, as well as existing academic work in the field, has been a consideration of its relationship with documentary” (p.17). Nevertheless, it is possibly that the understanding of Chinese public commentators and scholars has drawn on Western established theories and popular idea of Reality TV as “a piece of made-for-TV entertainment” (Kilborn, 2003, p.24). Public and academic debates on Reality TV in China has shown less interest in discussing Reality TV from a documentary perspective and thereby drawn less attention to examining the impact of Reality TV on the documentary genre.

Much of the concern and discussion reflected in domestic Reality TV seminars, public commentaries and academic writings has been devoted to mapping out the global vision of Reality TV by categorizing mainstream formats and highlighting their respective patterns of the format, style of the programming, the techniques of the narrative and the functions of their entertainment. Much of the attention has been paid to the issue of *localization*, in relation to the discussion of ethical conflicts caused by different cultural traditions. As Chinese scholar Xie and Chen (2006) argues,

Due to the restricted access to Western reality programmes, most of the Chinese research on Reality TV has remained in the level of the explanatory with most of the research taking the perspective of cultural critiques and or the respect of ethics. Scholars has been focused on the two subjects, “ethical dilemmas” and “the performance of localization (p.2)

As Xie and Chen’s comments points out, Reality TV as a completely imported television form very quickly bloomed in China. The majority of the earlier reality productions were not licensed. Therefore, television practitioners basically had to

learn by practice. Their hybrid nature and the controversial context involved in these formats made the process of localization very challenging. Television makers had to deal with various issues covering every aspect of programme making, such as production approach, casting agenda, filming skills, narrative strategies, production management, publicity techniques and distribution means. With the increasing commercialization of Chinese television, the pressure of ratings performance forced television practitioners to turn to television scholars and theorists for help.

After a few years of market testing and explorations of the appropriate production approach and method, local producers realized the importance of relying on media scholars to provide some theoretical foundation/framework to guide industry personnel in seeking solutions for the dwindling audience interest in reality programmes. In 2003, Guizhou Television Station (GZTV¹¹) held a “Chinese Reality TV Forum” in Guizhou. A group of media professionals, reality programme producers and media scholars who study Reality TV were invited to present their knowledge, share their production experiences and discuss issues which have emerged in the development of Reality TV since early this century. Much of the interest among the attendees related to the conception of *localization*, centred on viewing several locally produced *Survivor*-format productions.

GZTV, as the organizer of the forum, produced a *Survivor*-look series, called *Survival Camp in Canyon*¹² (*Zou ru xiang ge li la*) (2002-2003). As with many other local counterparts, the crew had struggled to both achieve market success and avoid social critique. In the same year, GDTV’s Programme Center (which the *TGCFS* production was subject to), associated with the scholarly *South China television Journal*, also arranged a forum and invited some experts, practitioners and scholars to discuss the production from a theoretical perspective (Yin, 2003).

¹¹ GZTV Station is a provincial-level television station which is located in the southwestern China.

¹² The series was broadcast in a programme, named *Thursday’s Great Challenge* (*Xinqi si da tiaozhan*)

To a large extent, the foregrounding of the role of media scholars in the practice of localizing the global format in the local television industry since then has resulted in dynamic interactions between academia and industry. Several leading media scholars such as Professor Hong Yi, Professor Guoming Yu and Professor Ruxue Ran have acted as consultants for the local hybrid productions or been invited as guests in the studio. The studied local production of *TGCFS* in fact invited a number of university professors and theorists (including Professor Yin and Professor Yu) to provide the crew some advice on how to improve the programming to cater to the interest, expectation and viewing habits of the local audience. Scholars were also invited as the guest of shows during the studio based finale to provide some comment and professional opinions on the programme.

Localizing the complex global hybrid format in a Chinese context was challenging for both Chinese television practitioners and viewers. Media scholars and theorists were expected to articulate the cultural implications of the hybrid nature of the format, filter the social concerns/nervousness around the cultural adaptability of the controversial global format and assist in a better transmission of the global context of the format into the local institutional framework.

This forum became one of the most important events in the history of Chinese Reality TV. The Chinese media scholar Gengyun Xie (2006) viewed the event as paving the way for a diversification of the Chinese reality trend. However, the available academic studies on Chinese documentary hybrids seem not to have broadened beyond an emphasis on its application value to the television industry. Most studies are mainly based on textual analysis of both local and global series. A comparative analysis is often adopted to identify the unique cultural patterns of Chinese reality series.

Some of the earliest academic research outcomes were contributed by experts and

scholars from CCTV and Tsinghua University. In 2001, the research department in CCTV and the Media and Communication Research Centre in Tsinghua University founded a research group to study the Western Reality TV phenomenon in order to provide television practitioners with some knowledge about the mostly updated television trend. In November 15, 2001, the research team presented their findings¹³, based on textual analysis of five Western popular reality formats, including *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *Loft Story* and *Temptation Island* and literature reviews of Western research outcomes. Western Reality TV was assessed as delivering voyeuristic pleasure by exposing people's privacy, relying on cruel contests to explore naked human nature in extreme situations, displaying sexuality and encouraging gambling. The need for localization was emphasized in this report.

The definition of "Reality TV"¹⁴ in this report was given as a type of gameshow featuring ordinary people in a contrived situation. The marketing success of these Western examples was addressed and the emergence of Reality TV in the West was briefly reviewed. The research also looked at the development of Reality TV in China. GDTV's first two seasons of the *TGCFs* series and Vhand's *Into Shangri-La* were discussed. The report indicated that "the emergence of Reality TV in China was closely associated with the transformation of Chinese society and culture" (CCTV & Tsinghua University, 2001, p.17).

The rise of consumer culture was considered as the major force for the advent of Reality TV in China in the early 2000s. The development of television media echoes a shift of television culture from propaganda and education, to entertainment and game playing. The construction of *Survivor* was argued to be that of back-stabbing in a

¹³ This is an unpublished research report. Three hundred copies were printed and circulated within Chinese television stations. A copy of the report of "Reality TV- the pattern of format and the trend of localization" was provided by the *TGCFs* crew during my field research in GDTV.

¹⁴ In this earlier study, the Western term of "Reality TV" was directly applied to label seven selected series, including five Western popular reality series and two local pioneer reality series.

cruel competition. Chinese scholars (Professor Hong Yin, Professor Ruxue Ran¹⁵) also expressed their concerns over the conflicts of ideology (voyeurism, cruel competition, sex and gambling), cultural tradition (Western individualism and socialistic collectivism) and aesthetic perceptions (story, relevance to everyday life and emotion). They asserted the necessity of localizing these global formats to adapt to the Chinese situation.

A whirlwind of entertainment: encountering TV Reality (Yin, Ran & Lu, 2006) was the first Chinese published book on Reality TV, which is a much advanced version of the previously mentioned pilot research report. This book is attributed to the same scholars and provides more detailed information about the development of the global Reality TV trend. A much larger number of both Chinese and Western popular reality series (10 Chinese reality series and 10 Western reality series) with a wide coverage of formats was introduced. The achievement of Chinese reality products was acknowledged, in terms of discarding the elements of naked human nature, violence, sex and a huge prize to create a culturally adaptable reality programme for the local viewer.

In this book, Yin, Ran and Lu also elicit an important conception of “experience culture” which is derived from Jame and Gilmor’s *Experience Economy* (2002). They argue that the key to Reality TV should be experience rather than voyeurism. The hybridized nature of fiction and fact as well as the techniques of audience interaction would help to transfer the individual experience of self-challenge, self-reflection and self-improvement into a collective experience shared by domestic viewers. This conception was crucial to the understanding of the production approach to *TGCFs* which was considered as just this kind of real “life experience” format¹⁶. This concept is also relevant to the cultural spirit of the outdoor sport format.

¹⁵ Those two Beijing-based media scholars were the earliest scholars contributing to studies on Reality TV and had an influence on television practitioners, critics and other academic researchers.

¹⁶ The origin of “real life experience” format is discussed in Chapter Five.

The other valuable points made in this book include a framework for the conception of Chinese entertainment ethics which is helpful for understanding Chinese producers and participants' unique encounters with the *Survivor*-style game formula in the production of *TGCF*S. In a section titled "critiques and reflections on Reality TV", Yin, Ran and Lu articulate difficulties and potential risks involved in the localization of a globally popular format in the unique Chinese circumstances. They (2006) argue that "there are great difference in education and culture among Chinese people. Therefore, the entertainment ethics of Chinese reality programme would tend to be much more conservative in the aspect of yearning for fortune, displaying sex, intervening in the private life or exposing a naked human nature, because China has a very different measurement. This is not only attributed to China's unique political and media system, but is also due to the huge discrepancy of fortune and culture in society"¹⁷ (p.228).

Overall, this book provides a profile of the current development of Reality TV both in China and overseas. The structure provides a good template which covers a wide range of topics (history, patterns, formats, production, marketing distribution, criticism and series). However, it contains more explanatory content than theoretical analysis. Some thought poking concepts (such as experience culture and Chinese entertainment ethics) and arguments (mainly drawing on the pilot report) are set up, but there is a lack of in-depth analysis in relation to a number of programmes.

A more recent book, *Reality TV: Theory, Format and Innovation* (Xie & Hong, 2007) was written by Chinese media scholars Xie Yungeng and Hong Chen. They addressed Chinese Reality TV's hard route to localization and innovation since the beginning of this season. Based on comparative analyses of China and Western reality programmes, this book discussed the development of Reality TV and provides a more systematic analysis of the formats, their patterns, programming, narrative strategies, marketing

¹⁷ This point of view is related to the discussion of the relationship of outdoor survival format and an emerging urban young middle class in Chapter Seven.

and distribution. The most valuable and novel aspects are the discussion of the innovation of Reality TV and the building of an industrial chain. This emphasis suggests the Chinese scholars' attempt to address the issues of most concern which emerged in the production. As Xie and Chen note in the book, Chinese television practitioners have urgently requested soundly developed theories to provide them a working guideline.

Although both books mentioned here present a large amount of information about Reality TV formats and provide a wide coverage of topics from specific programmes to various aspects of the format production, they are more in the realm of handbooks for practical application in the television industry. In order to inspire local television makers programme making and enhance their knowledge about the global format, Chinese media scholars have dedicated many chapters to introducing the globally popular television formats and exploring the Western management model of reality product. Much of the information is presented in an explanatory way rather than provoking theoretical debates. As Xie and Chen (2007) notes in the book,

The lagging behind of the theories indicates that Chinese scholars and theorists' understanding of Reality TV has still been in the stage of unconsciousness. No matter that the study on the theories or the practice of making reality programme are probed by testing and imitating each other. There is a lack of systematic analysis and foresight (p.3).

This comments echoes He (2005)'s concern of a lagging behind of the theoretical development of the documentary genre in China. In the case of Reality TV, to a large extent, the research interests of Chinese scholars seem to have been shaped by the industry's interests. They often apply Western theories to the Chinese factual television formats and discuss the significance of localizing such imported formats to the design of Chinese hybrids. Chinese media scholars mainly focus on building some grounded theory from a macro perspective, to fulfil the practical needs of the domestic television producers. In recent years, various reality formats have occupied

prime time television and become a staple of television outputs. Overall, the production quality, the programming skills and the marketing strategies seem to have improved. However, academic contributions on Reality TV studies, in particular on these productions have been largely absent.

3.4 Chinese Documentary

As argued in the previous section, a Chinese theoretical approach to the study of Reality TV has been overlooked in the past ten years. Chinese scholars who study Reality TV categorize it into the domain of entertainment programmes and draw a clear line between “Reality TV” and documentary. Reality TV has mainly been viewed as an outcome of the evolution of entertainment television genres, such as game shows, talent shows, travel shows, quiz shows and dating shows, but hardly any of the discussion seems to address the hybrid forms from a conventional *documentary* perspective.

Chinese media scholar Dan Yu (2002) has categorized the reality genre as an entertainment format which follows the development of performance-based variety shows, talent show and quiz shows in the late 1980s and 1990s. This implies that Chinese scholars see documentary hybrid formats as a genre detached from the conventional documentary genre.

A similar attitude can also be found in Chinese documentary theorist Suli He’s writing about the Chinese television documentary, *A study on the History of China's TV Documentary* (He, 2005). He criticized Western scholar Goethe College’s claim for integrating directly into documentary production and even pushing the bottom line of the ‘non-fiction’ genre (He, 2005, p.163). He considered such an approach as a dangerous attempt towards non-fiction programme making that could possibly lead to the sacrifice of documentary in order to cater for popular viewing tastes (He, 2005, p.163). However, in this case study documentary is *another* important concept

influencing the production approach of the pioneer reality production and the Chinese participant/viewer's interpretation of the format. This thesis' production research particularly examined the *TGCFs*'s kinship with the Western defined *documentary* genre and thereby considered the unique development of Chinese documentary. This theoretical debate over the definition of documentary genre needs to be articulated and clarified here.

In the Chinese context, the discussion of the *TGCFs* series involves complex relationships among documentary (*jilu pian*), a type of so-called "special-topic" programme (*zhuan ti pian*) and "real people show" (*zhenren xiu*) which is a Chinese translation of 'reality show'. The ambiguous conception of each term has generated much confusion and debate about the generic identification of the new hybrid form of television programming among Chinese television practitioners, media scholars and participants/viewers¹⁸. There are discursive views of the relationship between "special topic" programme (*zhuan ti pian*) and documentary (*jilu pian*). The "special topic" programme has been regarded as an alternative, sub-genre/category, a variation of documentary genre or a completely independent genre.

Here, I support the classification of treating "special topic" programmes as documentary, and for the use of the term of "documentary" as a contribution to the theoretical debates on Reality TV. The term of documentary (*jilu pian*) is not widely applied to label a wide range of both domestically produced and imported non-fiction films and television programmes that contribute to cultural, social and political discourse by presenting 'facts' of all sorts, revealing historical truth and exploring unattainable intangible reality. However, due to the historical context involved in the term of documentary (*jilu pian*), it generated confusion when applying this 1990s-imported term to label all the non-fiction programmes made in earlier days in China. The following discussion provides some historical backgrounds which help to

¹⁸ This aspect is discussed in Chapter Six.

make sense of these blurred concepts.

Over the past five decades, the development of the documentary genre in China has been closely associated with China's distinctive socio-political environment, which can be identified as having four major stages (Peng & Pen, 1999, He, 2005, Lin, 2005). Each stage of development reflects a strong brand which has both similarities and differences compared with the development of the documentary genre in the West.

The first stage is from 1958-1977, when documentary was the CCP's propaganda instrument serving national politics and the class struggle. Due to political kinship, the model and guideline for Chinese documentary making (including newsreels and the so-called "special topic" television programme) at this stage was the Soviet Union's concept of "visualized political discourse" (Lin, 2003, Peng & Ren, 1999 & He, 2005), which can be viewed as an indirect impact from Griersonian discourse on documentary (Peng & Ren, 1999).

The second stage refers to the 1980s which was the Golden Age for "special topic" television programme making in China. The discourse of nationalism and socialism penetrated into documentary making about Chinese culture, history, important political events or the Chinese government's achievements of socialistic construction. "Special topic" programmes made in this period often contained the cultural elite's reflections on their history. Since the reform of news programme had not begun, and television drama and variety shows were not competitive, television media gave an opportunity for the ratings success of the documentary genre (He, 2005).

Kilborn (2003), writing in 2003, states "[f]or better or for worse, television has been the major shaping force in determining the course of documentary in recent decades" (p.1). In China, the development of documentary in the post-Cultural Revolution days has been closely associated with television media. This is different from the West

where cinema has also been a site for the development of the documentary genre since the early twentieth century. Moreover, in contrast to many Western countries that have institutions such as the BBC (UK) or ABC (Australia) or commissioning agencies such as New Zealand on Air contributing to documentary making; “China does not have a public fund or cultural fund to sponsor the production of documentaries” (Lü, 2003, p.304). As a result of this, documentaries in China have mainly had to rely on the state-owned television stations to fund, produce and broadcast them. In comparison to independently made documentaries, regularly-based broadcast documentaries often did not have a strong personal style. Various works were created by different documentary makers broadcast under the name of a documentary programme and thereby the collective works often reflected a consistency in style, formula and subject matter.

In the later 1980s, Chinese television stations started to gain a higher profile for international award winning documentaries and consequently, some major television stations (such as CCTV, Shanghai TV, GDTV, Sichuan TV¹⁹) selected elite professionals to make documentaries without consideration of cost and provided the documentary makers with adequate equipment, funds and time for them to make programmes targeting international documentary competitions (He, 2005).

The beginning of the third stage was marked by the so-called New Documentary Movement²⁰ dating from the mid 1980s to mid 1996. *Documentary (jilu pan)* was introduced to China with the rise of the New Documentary Movement. During this period, a group of observational documentary productions emerged outside of the state-owned television system. This group was often characterized as “avant-garde” Chinese “documentaries” illustrating a strong influence of the traditions of Cinema Vérité and Direct Cinema²¹ (Saunders, 2007).

¹⁹ A provincial level television station in the mid continent.

²⁰ The Chinese New Documentary Movement is a theoretical definition. It was invented by Chinese documentary theorist, Xinyu Lü in his book *Documenting China: New Documentary Movement in Contemporary China* (2003).

²¹ Some pioneer influential works included *The Odyssey of The Great Wall (Wang Changcheng)* (1991, CCTV,

Lü (2003) argues that the Chinese new documentary movement was the independent documentary maker's rebellion against the established documentary discourse that had dominated the creation of the non-fiction genre in China for decades. Focusing on the concerns of the lower echelons of society, new wave documentary makers were interested in sub-cultural subject matter and those human interest stories largely absent from the mainstream media, and particularly overlooked by the large-scale special topic programmes with their macro view reflecting national and governmental perspectives.

In the meantime, television station sent documentary makers and Chinese media scholars to have their eyes opened through international cultural exchanges in documentary making. CCTV co-produced several documentaries with Japanese documentary makers²² in the 1980s and a group of Japanese observational documentaries attended Shanghai International Festival held by Shanghai Television²³ in the late 1980s. Here the Western concept of *documentary* was introduced to China. Meanwhile, Chinese documentary makers learned the production methods and techniques of observational documentary making from their Japanese colleagues (He, 2005).

In the 1990s, television media made great contributions to the prosperity of the new documentary culture in the early 1990s and helped to popularize the concept of documentary, in the sense of contrasting it with the conception of “special topic”

NTV), *Bumming in Beijing (Liulang Beijing: zuihou de mengxiangzhe)* (Director Wu Wenguang, 1988-1990, 70 mins) and *The Square (Guangchang)* (Director, Zhang Yuan & Duan Jingchuan, 1994, 100 mins).

²² CCTV coproduced *The Silk Road* with NHK in 1980 which made CCTV's television practitioners aware of the explicit different of documentary conception and working approach between the two production institution (Guo, 1997). In 1988, CCTV co-produced *Yellow River (Huanghe)* with NHK and in 1991 CCTV worked with NTV to make *The Odyssey of The Great Wall (Wang Changcheng)*.

²³ 1989 Shanghai held Shanghai International television festival. A group of Japanese documentaries which used observational mode of documentary techniques influenced a group of television practitioners in Shanghai TV international sector which was the sector responsible for making documentary (Lü, 2003). It is similar the function of Social-Education Sector in Guangdong Television Station, the documentary

programmes. In 1992, CCTV launched a news magazine programme, *Focus* (CCTV, 1992-) which claimed to provide a space for “ordinary people to tell their own stories” (*Jiangshu laobaixing ziji de gushi*) on national television. In 1993, China’s largest provincial television station Shanghai TV launched *Documentary Edit Room* (*Jilupian bianjishi*) (1993-), which broadcast a group of well-received television documentaries about the stories of ordinary people living in Shanghai. From then on television documentary developed from serial-based broadcasts to regularly-based programmes. The programme scored more than 20% audience ratings in Shanghai, which was a phenomenal success. However, with the mushrooming of similar kinds of documentary in the domestic television networks, the ratings of *Documentary Edit Room* declined to merely 6% and 7% around 1995 and 1996 (He, 2005). Although this prosperous development of documentary had passed its peak by the mid 1990s, it nurtured a large number of Chinese documentary audiences and documentary makers (Lü, 2003) which provided a good environment for the emergence of Reality TV in the new century. More importantly, this cultural phenomenon shaped audiences’, television practitioners’, critics’ and scholars’ understanding of the term of documentary (*jilu pian*).

In 1996, the publication of a report by CCTV titled *Defining the Chinese Special Topic*, provided a temporary answer to the debate over the categorisation of Chinese television documentary (at least from a Chinese broadcasting television perspective). This report gave a very detailed definition of documentary and provided many indications and interpretations.

Television documentary uses filming techniques to relatively integrated recording political, economic, military, cultural and historical affair and also provided esthetical enjoyment. The programme should directly find subjects from real people’s real stories. Fictional creation and enactment are unacceptable. Some basic news report techniques such as interview, photography and cinematographic techniques should be used in recording the process of happening. To use “waiting, catching and selecting” techniques or following up techniques to record real people’s real happening in the real environment and real time. It not only should

guarantee the integral real but also requires authenticity in details (cited in He, 2005, p.38).

This definition clearly noted that the use of observational mode of filming techniques was a criterion for the generic assessment of non-fiction programmes. It is worth noting that in the last three decades, the pattern of documentary programme making experienced a change from the Griersonian style of “image matching sound” in the 1980s, to “synchronic sound recording” in the 1990s, and “the reconstruction of reality” (*zhenshi zaixian*) in the 2000s (He, 2005).

The fourth stage refers to the new century when documentary making turns to be more market driven, more concerned with the mainstream society’s real life and more hybridized with other genres. With the change of the funding system of Chinese television stations to a self-funding structure, the television station’s support for documentary production was no longer as easy as it had been in the past. Documentary making has become more and more concerned with market sales. A number of independent production houses gained access to the business of documentary making. In the meantime, CCTV and Shanghai TV launched a documentary channel in early 2000. During this stage, the legalization of “re-enactments” in documentary making generated wide debates among people in the industry and academia. As the Discovery and National Geographic channels became more and more popular in China, the idea of constructing reality with the assistance of staging and performance no longer seemed controversial among non-fiction programme makers. In the last few years, “re-enactment” has become a common strategy widely adopted in local produced documentary.

Theoretical studies on the Chinese documentary genre emerged in the mid 1990s (He, 2005). In the past, due to the lack of a theoretical framework for the genre, Chinese scholars basically borrowed theories from literature and film, and as a result this genre was associated with 'high-brow' culture. Chinese documentary theorist Suliu He (2005)

points out that in the 1990s “television as one of the fastest developed industries did not have a counterpart with a parallel development of theoretical research which seems thin and weak and not matching practical developments” (p.99).

Overall, He (2005) summarizes the patterns of the development of documentary genre in China as reflecting “a sense of returning to the essence of the genre, the subject matter changed from politics to human nature/social reality; from iconic hero to everyday people, from a pedagogical manner to authentic recording” (p.215).

3.4.1 Theoretical Debates on “Special Topic” Programme

The understanding of the context of “special topic” programmes (*zhuti pian*) and its relationship with documentary (*jilu pian*) is important, because those two terms were what the *TGCFs* crew often used to label their earlier seasons, in particular the inaugural season²⁴. Moreover, these serialized non-fiction programmes were produced by the Social-Education Sector²⁵ in GDTV²⁶. This format was modelled on both the Japanese *Airway Boy* formula and conventional travel-based “special topic” programmes.

As the history of Chinese documentary reveals, the term of “special topic” programme was created within a specific historical context in the development of the local television media. It experienced changes throughout the next half century. Its function was extended from political propaganda to a broader public education and cultural information, with the government redefining it as an instrument to “serve the people

²⁴ The crew’s knowledge about the term “real people show” (which is a Chinese translation of “reality show”) was developed after the first run screen of the first season. This point is discussed in Chapter Five.

²⁵ The first two seasons of the *TGCFs* series were subjected to the Social-Education Sector in GDTV which was responsible for making non-fictional programmes to fulfil the television station’s role of political propaganda and public education. In the 1990s, GDTV built a reputation for travel-based “special-topic” programmes in China.

²⁶ The inaugural season of the *TGCFs* series is the GDTV documentary maker’s attempt to hybridize the travel based “special topic” programme with a Japanese popular factual-based show, named *Airway Boys* (Appendix 1). The production approach of the *TGCFs* series, in particular the narrative was strongly influenced by the style and production of travel-based “special topic” programmes in the 1990s.

and the Party” (He, 2005). In the post-Cultural Revolution days, the foregrounding of television’s public service function and the needs for foreign publicity for the nation contributed to an extension of the subjects and the diversification of topics for these special topic programmes (Lü, 2003). In the last three decades, state-owned television stations, in particular national and provincial level television stations, produced numerous large-scale “special topic” series ranging across topics from politics, history, culture, arts and social environment to natural resources²⁷. They had shared characteristics of a large production scale, a collaborative creation, an interest in mainstream culture, a macro view from the national perspective and the foregrounding of literature texts²⁸ (He, 2005).

Although this kind of serialized programmes often tends to be a big investment with a long term production period and has less potential to generate profit, many provincial television stations are likely to fund “special topic” projects for the purpose of accomplishing their obligations of being a public service institution and to demonstrate their production capacity in order to enhance their reputation within the domestic television industry. Since television stations in China are government-operated institutions, it is also common to find that the funding of a “special topic” production by a television station is based on issues of socio-political and cultural significance.

The term of “special topic” programme (*Zhuan ti pian*) is opposite to that of television drama and constructed television genres such as variety shows or game shows. As its name implies, a “special topic” programme often has a highly focused topic about real people and real events, and provides a detailed examination of, and in-depth

²⁷ A group of large-scale special topic series with political matters and humanistic subjects received widespread distribution, including *Yangtze River (Huashuo Changjiang)* (1983, CCTV), *Stories about the Canal (Huashuo Changjiang)* (1984, CCTV), *Let the History Tell the Future (Rang lishi gaosu weilai)* (1987, CCTV)

²⁸ With the influence of literary culture in the 1980s, in terms of the involvement of literature on the special topic programme making, the foregrounding of a literature text became a distinctive characteristic. It is a type of special topic programmes, called “literature documentary” (“Wenxian jilupian”) which often use newsreels, real images, photos, archives and interview resources to present a subject, event or person with historical, political, social or cultural significance.

perspective on, a topic, but the production methods for these non-fiction programmes were formulaic and their themes were often ideologically driven. Akin to propaganda in the political culture of the time, the narration of the special topic programmes was scripted first and then the programme maker worked to find and/or film real images to match the voice over. Documentary techniques (e.g. newsreel footage, interviews and voice over) were used to present a particular point of view or perspective, but various artistic devices (e.g. montage, music enhancement or rhetorical approaches) could also be adopted to reinforce its arguments, while making the point of view sound both objective and persuasive.

This research reveals that many Chinese media practitioners' understanding of the documentary genre has apparently been shaped by what type of documentaries are popular in the local market or how extensive their access is to global trends in documentary production. The "New Documentary Movement" made *documentary* a popular term in the 1990s. Meanwhile "special topic" programmes have been continuously used to identify non-fiction television programming as a whole. Both Chinese media professionals and scholars have an ambiguous attitude towards the two terms. The patterns which emerged in the new wave of non-fiction programmes, in terms of the application of *vérité* techniques (e.g. fly-on-the-wall camera, synchronous sound and non narration), the foregrounding of authorship, an emphasis on truth telling, an interest in the marginalized subject matter and concerns of social democracy, have widened the non-fiction programme makers' perceptions which had long been shaped by the formalized production method of special topic programming.

Since the mid 1990s, the observational mode became an influential documentary style which reshaped people's understanding of the concept of the genre. With an extension of the subjects and the diversification of the topics in non-fictional productions since the reform of television media in the late 1970s, the new mode of documentary practice evoked an endless debate about the similarities and differences to the special topic format, and its position within documentary. Consequently, theoretical

discussions of the relationship between the two resulted in a different view of how to define the historical period of the development of documentary genre in China. These developments share some similarities with the broad history of Western documentary (such as the Griersonian documentary in 1930s, Direct Cinema and Cinema vérité in 1960s, etc).

The discussions among people in industry and academia in China were based on the practical experience of practitioners and the theoretical interpretations of media scholars, and have generally been divided into two strands. One strand regards the special topic programme as a subgenre of documentary. The other strand is dedicated to celebrating the separation of the two. The main concerns centred on the special topic's role as a political propaganda tool for the government and the Party. I would argue that because of this historical background, the "special topic" programme has been stamped with the implications of propaganda and state control. This kind of impression has detached the term from more contemporary ideas that are associated with the documentary genre, such as cinema vérité and social democracy.

I consider that this kind of view denies the connections between politics and the documentary genre, as well as between mainstream culture and the documentary genre. Documentary is never ideologically or politically free. Although television serves a function as the communist party's political ideological machine, the mainstream socialistic ideology that is embedded within many special topic programmes is not necessarily all politically-driven and in fact many of its aspects overlap with the traditional Chinese cultural system and ethical values which have been established for thousand of years within China. Evidently, the group of influential special topic series made in 1980s also reflects a humanistic approach, in terms of presenting social reality and the concerns of ordinary people's lives. Therefore, the problem that emerged in the Chinese theoretical debates, such as Xinyu Lü's attempt to distinguish the special topic programme from the documentary genre, is a rather narrow perspective on the definition of the documentary genre itself.

In my opinion, the special topic programme is a Chinese term for the expositional mode of factual programme which can be viewed as a subgenre of documentary. The difference between the two concepts, as their names in Chinese suggest, is a difference in the styles of their documentary approach. “Special topic” (*Zhuati*) suggests a foregrounding of the subject matter in their documentary making. This kind of approach is similar to what Bill Nichols (2001) refers to as the expositional mode of documentary which “addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that advance an argument about the historical world” (p.32) and makes the audience perceive that they are given an objective view of the subject. The “special topic” programmes made in earlier days typically like to use “Voice of God” techniques (Guo, 1997). The voice over was juxtaposed with selected images to enhance their persuasive discourse. The given perspective of the programme was not necessarily that of the programme maker. Instead the programmes are often constructed and presented according to the prevalent political instruction or dominant socio-ideological guidelines. This pattern shares the similarities with Griersonian documentary and the Soviet Union’s political documentary made during the Second World War period (Peng & Ren, 1999, Lin, 2003 and He, 2005).

Documentary is called “jilu pian” in Chinese; a direct translation would be “documenting/recording programme”. The term emphasizes the importance of truth telling through images. The documentary makers who emerged in the New Documentary Movement were against the idea of scripting in advance, directing, rehearsal and voice over, but in favour of using *vérité* techniques and providing more space for an audience to contemplate. This new wave of Chinese documentaries reflects documentary makers’ concerns about the presentation of authenticity and factuality and demonstrates a spirit of humanism (Lü, 2003), which is oppositional to the mainstream official ideologies (e.g. Confucianism, Marxism-Leninism, Maoism, socialism and nationalism).

In my opinion, although the generic context of the Chinese “special topic” programmes can be unique, the codes and conventions of the documentary mode derived from Western theories can still be applied to identify its shared patterns with the documentary genre. Thus, I think that the pedagogic style of non-fiction programme making in Mainland China can be compared to the Western-derived expositional mode of documentary production. Meanwhile, Chinese recognition of the documentary genre should also not be limited to the non-participant observational mode. The established Chinese definition of documentary genre needs to be extended and updated to be able to negotiate the increasingly blurred boundary between documentary and documentary hybrids. It can be argued that the long debates on the relationship between the “special topic” programme and documentary in the Chinese context are essentially derived from the contradictions between the aesthetic perceptions of the expositional mode and observational mode of documentary making, and the conflict of treating documentary as a tool to construct political and social discourse.

My research suggests that in the earlier years, the production teams’ understanding of the concepts of “special topic” programme and documentary were often ambiguous. Their application of the two terms was often identical. *TGCFS* shared a similarity to the expositional mode of the special topic programme that had been the dominant mode applied to Chinese non-fictional production for decades.

The studied case, the *TGCFS* series, reflects a complex mixture of the tradition of the “special topic programme” and the characteristics of the observational mode of documentary. The former implies the essential influence of the mainstream mode of non-fictional productions on the production approach to Chinese documentary hybrids in regard to the Chinese audiences’ viewing habits. And the latter demonstrates the direct impact of the style of the two pioneering formats, *Airwave Boy* and *Survivor*, on

the television presentation of the localized format²⁹. Although the social context of the Chinese “special topic programme” is unique, the codes and conventions of the documentary mode are familiar from Western theories. Bill Nichols’ documentary theories as a theoretical framework can still be applied to identify its shared patterns with other forms in the documentary genre.

3.5 Localization

Moran & Keane (2004) note that

The global circulation of Western-centred, or more specifically, American-centred cultural products, contributes to the formation and dissemination of a global shared cultural that reaches across the boundaries of nation-states. In the process American cultural products play a role in the formation of local television cultures” (p.29).

Globally speaking, *Survivor* has demonstrated a strong appeal to the international market. Following the phenomenal success of the premiere of CBS’s *Survivor* in 2000, this format has been sold to more than 30 countries worldwide. However, an important aspect missing in the studied case is its participation in transnational/global format trading. The studied case was not a licensed production, neither were other locally produced *Survivor*-like format productions. Both the international trade and the “cultural borrowing” of the *Survivor* format implies that the value of this market-tested format is rooted in its great potential for replicating the initial US ratings success in other cultural contexts and market environments. However, the practice of localizing this global format in fact is far more complicated than simply following an industry “bible” or “creatively” hybridizing the concept.

Mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Taiwan have many similar cultural tradition and values. Popular cultural flows among these areas have been active in the past two decades, in particular among Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. There is

²⁹ These points are particularly discussed in the Chapter Six.

an asymmetry of transnational cultural flows which has resulted in an uneven development of the cultural industry and political-economic circumstances in each place (Iwabuchi, 2005). In this transnational circulation of culture, fashion, media and information, Japan has been in the leading position, where as Mainland China often has a time lag with its neighbours. There are numerous Japanese programmes that have been copied and imitated by Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese television industries (Moran & Keane, 2004, p.29). In the 1990s, Japanese television industries pioneered the production of reality television programmes (Moran & Keane, 2004).

Guangdong as a “special television” zone has long been influenced by intraregional media and popular culture flows (Iwabuchi, 2005, p.33). Since the early 1980s, television practitioners in Guangdong province (as mentioned in the previous chapter) have had access to Hong Kong television. Local television caught up to the new form of entertainment programmes (e.g. variety shows in 1980s, game shows in 1990s and reality programmes in 2000) by making their own versions with a local cast and specific social and cultural elements. The successful debut generated what Keane reflects on as the phenomenon of *isomorphism*. Outdoor survival format programmes started to mushroom and developed as the mainstream reality format until 2004.

Keane’s idea of *isomorphism* “refers to the tendency of producers to mimic and even clone without due consideration of the market flooding” (Keane, 2003, p.89). This is the common pattern of Chinese television, a result of the deregulation of television market and the supply-driven television environment. In the past two decades, the ratings success of a new form of television programme would be soon followed by a number of imitators in all levels of television stations. Such a phenomenon largely shortens the popularity of the programme. Keane speculates that isomorphism does not necessarily lead to a more innovative media environment. However, in this studied case, the pioneer production of *TGCFS* took the borrowing of ideas as a starting point and continuously modified the format while attempting to develop an original one of its own. This single case provides insight into different aspects of the

exercise of cloning in the Chinese context³⁰.

3.6 Cultural Discount

Iwabuchi's investigation of the ratings failure of a Japanese adaptation of the *Survivor* format by TBS in 2002 reveals that the transformation of *Survivor*-style of game playing into the Japanese cultural context caused the diminishing of the appeal of its origin. In 2001, the poor ratings performance of CBS's original season of *Survivor* in China national television³¹ also indicates that when broadcast to Chinese audiences it was unable to generate a similar kind of engagement for the Chinese-dubbed version of *Survivor* as it did for the American audience.

Iwabuchi has applied the concept of "cultural discount" (Hoskins & Mirus, 1987) to describe the inadaptability of the Western game format to the oriental cultural environment. Hoskins and Mirus (1987) argue that "a particular programme rooted in one culture, and thus attractive in that environment will have a diminished appearance elsewhere as viewers find it difficult to identify with the style, values and behavioural patterns of the material in question" (p.23). The diminution of the appeal of an imported foreign programme among Chinese viewers is a possible result of the language (even if dubbed and subtitled), the way of life and other characteristics of Chinese cultural traditions that the domestic viewer may feel difficult to relate to (Collins, 1990). Compared with television made in Japan and Hong Kong, which Chinese audiences can more easily relate to, Iwabuchi argues that it is because of the "perceived cultural and physical similarities" (Iwabuchi, 2005, p.30).

This applies even to global media giants such as New Corp who had access to Guangdong Market in 2001. Instead of broadcasting the American original of *America's most Wanted* to East Asian audiences, it co-produced with the China's

³⁰ This point of view is discussed across various chapters in relation to the production agenda.

³¹ This example is discussed in Chapter Five.

Ministry of Public Security a local version; *Wanted! In China* (2001). The logical thinking behind such an arrangement is to effectively address an East Asian audience by working on a locally related subject. The real footage of Chinese police officers chasing criminals would have more appeal for their targeted viewers than watching American police doing the same things.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has covered some major theoretical concepts that needed to be clarified before moving to the detailed discussions of the production agenda of the case study. The following chapter explains the methodological considerations involved in this entire research project.

Chapter Four: Considerations of Methodology

This research on Chinese “Reality TV” is primarily based on a single case study, using a combination of textual analysis and production research. This research into the case study is framed by a qualitative approach.

Fairclough asserts (1998) that “media studies is very much a multidisciplinary area” (p.2) where different disciplines can work with their own notions of what Media Studies mean. Various cultural and ethnographic research approaches, including a comparative textual analysis, semi-structured in-depth interview and an ethnographic production observation were built into the design of the case study. These qualitative methods can be viewed as “particularly helpful in the generation of an intensive, detailed examination of a case” (Bryman, 2001, p.48). This chapter discusses the methodological considerations of the research approach used here, discussing the methods used in researching the topic.

4.1 The Research Approach: A Case Study

As previously noted Chinese “Reality TV” is an extensive and underdeveloped area, which offers great potential for implementing various research approaches. The decision to study “Reality TV” in Mainland China through an in-depth investigation of a domestic production was based on careful consideration of the *operational possibility* of a PhD study and the *external validity* of the research outcome.

The *operational possibility* of this study is based on the nature of the research as an exploratory research on a broad topic. As explained in earlier chapters, “Reality TV” remains a relatively new research area. The literature research on the published articles and books about “Reality TV” in China indicated that those Chinese scholars’ contributions on this extensive topic have been limited in quantity, superficial in quality and narrow in focus. Thus, this research project is designed to be an in-depth

and detailed case study on one Chinese reality programme and to expand several major ideas and arguments by analyzing various aspects of this case. This type of approach enables me to sketch a profile of the development of one specific reality format in contemporary Chinese media. Currently, “Reality TV” formats are continuously developing in China’s television industry. The insights provided by this case study can then be used and enriched by a multiplicity of comparative studies in the future (Wengraf, 2002).

An exploratory research project can often rely on secondary research of available literature and data, and use qualitative approaches to gain an insight into a given situation. A large amount of public commentaries about Chinese “Reality TV” were used as the secondary resource in this research. Other important materials include audio-visual products (a group of reality programmes available on TV, DVD and internet), institutional archives (provided by the GDTV production crew) and relevant publications written in both Chinese and English.

This case study uses qualitative approaches, in term of analyzing the televisual text of the programme and exploring its production agenda by conducting specific kinds of production research. As a Mandarin-speaking media scholar, I gained access to a large-scale local production and conducted a production observation and a wide range of interviews in 2006. I had no intention of taking a “macroscopic” view of the Chinese television system as a whole, nor had any ambition to provide an overview of all Chinese “Reality TV” programmes. Moreover, instead of looking into several cases to enhance a sense of *generalizability* to the population at large, this research undertakes a close examination of one specific programme produced by a specific regional television institution in a particular time period.

External validity is the other key concern of the design of the case study. The problem with a case study of a television production is obvious. The production of *TGCF* operated within a unique production culture, was created with a distinctive style and

became popular within a specific historical period. Therefore, the purpose of doing a case study is to focus on “generalization within a case” (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p.217). Bryman (2001) has noted that “the researcher is usually concerned to elucidate the unique features of the case” (p.49), noting that this is opposite to a common concern of social science research “to generalize to other cases or to populations beyond the case” (p.51).

In my primary research on Chinese “Reality TV” at the beginning of my PhD studies in 2005, I found that the outdoor survival format had been the dominant reality strand on domestic television screen since the year 2000. Evaluating several potential research subjects, including *TGCFs* (GDTV, 2000-2005), *Into Shangri-La*¹ (Vhand, 2001), *Quest China*² (House Film, 2008), *TGCFs* as the earliest “homegrown” and name brand Chinese reality programme demonstrated both high research value and feasibility.

More importantly, the production team was willing to be studied. I received an enthusiastic response from the Executive Director³ of *TGCFs*. The production team verbally agreed to provide access to their upcoming production in 2006 and also to offer assistance to my research during a call in the middle of July, 2005; when he confirmed the initial promise and sent me DVD copies of the second to fourth seasons of *TGCFs* series. The strong Chinese cultural agenda, the *Survivor*-look, the improvement in production quality and the constant changes of the format indicated

¹ Beijing-based private-run media company did not reply my request for conducting a research on this production in the stage of my primary research.

² *Quest USA (Datiaozhan)* is the first Mandarin-language reality series produced by a US-based production company, House Film in 2003. This 12-episode reality series chronicles the cross-country journey and adventure of four teams (three people on each team) in their attempt to win the final victory. Each Chinese team represents a different country or region (Mainland China/USA/Hong Kong/Taiwan). This bilingual show was aired on five major television stations in the US and attracts both overseas Chinese and American local audiences. In late 2005, the production company moved to Shanghai and looked for an opportunity to produce its second reality project, *Quest China*, which planned to feature three or four teams (China/USA/UK/Australia) competing tasks and adventuring across Mainland China. Producer Sarah Zhang expressed her will to support my research on this production project during a meeting in Shanghai in 2005. However, this production project did not come to production until 2008.

³ The initial contact with director Tao Lin was made with the assistance of a Chinese media student in the University of Waikato in June 2005.

that this large-scale and long-term reality series would provide rich examples to address various issues generated by Chinese “Reality TV”. More importantly, the production team planned to continue to produce a new season of *TGCFS* with a completely new theme (an *Apprentice*-like format) in the summer of 2006.

This “single” case with six-season public records, hundreds of hours of televisual content and nearly seven years of production history provide rich data to aid in making sense of how a particular Chinese reality format/programme was made and to achieve a better understanding of the meaning of localizing the transnational/global television format in the Chinese media context. No matter how distinctive the case turns out to be, as Silverstone (1985) concludes based on his own production research experience, “the programme must be the product of a negotiation with a set of political, aesthetic, technical and bureaucratic constraints” (p.2). Applying these insights to my particular case study, Silverstone’s experience also suggests the importance of context for the reality programme-making in a given organization or culture.

As one of the major “homegrown” programmes for GDTV, *TGCFS* is of considerable interest in its own right. The series has some unique attributes in relation to its distinctive production environment. To some extent, the uniqueness of the programme indicates the controversial aspect and possibly the disadvantage of the case study, in terms of the potential for the series to speak on its own rather than reflecting a wider reference value. However, the changes over the seasons of the series reflect many features that can mirror ongoing Chinese media reforms and the changing landscape of the Chinese television industry.

4.2 Tripartite Framework: Text-Production-Reception

In order to achieve my objectives, a triangulation (Wengraf, 2002) approach of the text, production and reception was deployed in this exploration of a complex

television reality format in a Chinese context. The “production-text-reception” model as a framework has been widely used in contemporary media studies. It derives from the “sender-message-receiver” model in linguistic studies and “institution-text-audience” method in culture studies. In the example of documentary studies, Bill Nichols (2001) considered that “[f]or every documentary there are at least three stories that intertwine: the filmmaker’s, the film’s and the audience’s” (p. 40). To build a triangulation approach into a documentary study enables a cross checking of the different perspectives to be made of these three stores. Consequently, an in-depth interpretation of a documentary and ideally a more comprehensive understanding of the genre can be obtained.

Theoretically, an insight into a case study relies on a synthesis of the patterns identified from close analysis of the text, the viewpoints interpreted from an in-depth investigation of its production, and the data gathered through a strategic approach to its audience reception. In considering time limits and my research budget, I chose not to conduct extensive audience research (such as the use of a survey, focus groups or observation of the viewing experience). Instead, research into the issue of audience reception relied on the available official audience ratings and comments gathered through interviews with media professionals, volunteer participants and local journalists.

4.2.1 Textual Analysis

Textual analysis had a fundamental influence in the design of the entire production research. Before entering the production fieldwork, an interpretation of the available televisual texts helped to develop a sense of what had been broadcast to the Chinese audience and prompted me to come up with some relevant questions about the team's production practice. By looking at the textual features of the Chinese survival-format programme, in terms of its specific arrangement and thematic emphasis, the origins of

the hybrid format were identified and the distinctive features of the Chinese formula were recorded. These two features later became important aspects of the entire thesis.

In the process of interpreting the textual encoding, particular attention was paid to the technical aspects of the televisual languages, such as the images, graphics, sounds and music which operate to offer symbolic meanings. These elements are constructed in a particular way for the audience to decode with reference of their cultural frameworks and generic assumptions. The study of the signification of the filming techniques, construction, characters, themes and rhetoric explores the assumptions and cultural meanings of the content, format, style, narrative and performance in the particular text. Through this textual analysis changes made over the six seasons of *TGCFS* series were recorded.

The cultural impact of transnational/global formats are identified through a comparison in the first instance to two foreign formats, *Airwave Boys* and *Survivor*, and secondly to a range of Chinese reality programmes in different formats. Comparing and contrasting the survival-format made in different countries and various hybrid formats made by different local media houses allowed me to identify their similarities and differences, and the cultural relevance of the studied case with other reality programmes. This analytical approach helped me to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the implications and complexity of the practice of localizing the transnational/global television format in the Chinese media environment.

Sharing the common cultural framework with Chinese viewers and television makers allowed me to more easily identify local cultural characteristics and foreign cultural influences. However, to treat texts as “self-contained systems” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.10) in studies of a moving image medium may lead the researcher to reach a subjective understanding of the subject or generate some critical bias for the topic. In order to avoid what Hall (1980) argues “*The margin of understanding*”, it is important to make textual decoding cross reference to textual encoding. While the producer has

constructed the text in a particular way, the reader might interpret it in a slightly different manner. There can be a range of possible alternative readings that differ from the producer's "preferred reading" one way or another.

4.2.2 Audience

The multiplicity of audience interpretations and the dynamic relationship between the medium and its audience means that the audience is the most under-researched aspect of this project. Many academic researchers have addressed the complexity and difficulties of conducting research on audiences (Ang, 1991, Hill, 2004 and Ruddock 2001). Hight (2004) points out that "many critical discourses on documentary hybrids draw on narrow understandings of their relationships with their audience" (p.237). The issue of the audience is integral to this thesis.

In this case study, one of the most difficult aspects of conducting audience research was identifying and locating the audience. *TGCFS* was broadcast to national audience through Guandong Satellite TV, but the diversity of the regional viewing interest, economic development and many other factors made it very difficult to pin down a sample which would represent the national audience. The programme also screened in two versions, Mandarin and Cantonese, with different narrative approaches on a satellite channel and a local channel respectively. These distribution means leads to a very complicated division of audience viewing experience⁴.

Furthermore, the difficulties of studying audiences can also be attributed to the complicated viewing practices of hybrid formats. *TGCFS* challenged Chinese viewers' established genre assumptions of documentary, game shows and soap opera. Hill's audience research on the popular factual television identifies the active and multiple roles played by the viewer as "witness and interpreter" who occupies

⁴ The production crew's assumed audience is discussed in Chapter Seven and the issue of local programme makers' access to the viewing audience is examined in Chapter Nine)

“multiple spaces, between fact and fiction” (2007, p. 215). Corner and Pels (2003) argue that, “audiences are aware that there has been a breakdown of the boundaries between the public and popular, a focus on spectacle, emotion and personality, a new aesthetics of the real” (cited in Hill, 2007, p. 214). These recognized dynamics of the viewing activities are likely to be shared by Chinese viewers.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the central argument of this thesis has an emphasis on the production practice of the localization of a survival-based format. Therefore, an exploration of the audience and their reception of the format programme in this research is mainly from the perspective of the media professionals (who usually were keen to collect audience feedback), participants (who often shared the same role as audiences) and public commentators (whose opinions represent a mainstream public response). Most of the relevant information and knowledge presented here was gathered from people who had different degrees of direct engagement with the production aspects of the studied case.

In considering the research focus of this case study, the scale of the doctoral research and the perceived difficulties of conducting an extensive audience research on *TGCFs* series were key issues. The issue of the audience in this case is firstly focused on exploring the institutional concerns on audiences through an examination of the connections between the decision making of the production team and their targeted audiences. Secondly, the binary of the role of the participant/audience is considered as an important aspect to understand social attitudes towards the survival-based format and to acknowledge the subtle perceptions of the role switch for participants. Finally, attention was paid to the local print media which helped the media exposure of the television event. The multiple roles played by local journalists as social critics, publicists, and ordinary viewers illustrate a dynamic interaction between the audience and the media.

4.2.3 Production Research

Studying production is an important part of the process of understanding how a television programme is actually created. The significance of including television production within criticism and research has been acknowledged by John Corner (1999). The televisual production contributes to the understanding of some crucial aspects which would otherwise remain unknown by merely doing a textual analysis of the programme. Those aspects include the specific methods employed in the production, the varieties of creative decision-making within the production process, the impact of the institutional framework on the production practice and the connections between the producer and the societal context. However, in the broader scope of television studies, there are only a small number of media researchers contributing in this way to understand production research practice. As Dornfeld (1998) pointed out,

The profitable orientation toward the study of audiences has left in its wake a shallow pool of research on production processes, and a limited theorization of producers as the conduits of corporate ideologies (p.13)

Over recent decades, there has been a lack of direct attention to the production process in the television studies which has been attributed to a complex and often contradictory understanding of television media. As Meehan (1994) argues, “the term television embraces a range of social practices bounded by material constraints” (p.64). A television production is “put together according to a routine and a complex division of labour and deadlines” (Altheide, 1996, p.9). Until the 1980s the majority of investigations into television production had been focused on news production. Due to its routinized agenda, news making is comparatively easy to study (Halloran, 1998) .

The theoretical debate over the value of studying the production process in television studies is rooted in the role of the television producer who has often been regarded as an agent of commercial practice manipulated by a media institution. Dornfeld (1998) argues that

We need to rethink producers as particular types of agents, producing media texts within contexts constrained by culture, ideology, and economy, but operating within particular social locations and frameworks (p.13).

It is critical to understand how the television producers negotiate their roles within the constraints derived from economic pressure, the organizational culture of the television institution, the criteria of professionalism, and political ideology (in a Chinese context for instance) during the production process.

In practical terms, there are also considerable difficulties in conducting research into the production side. As Corner (1999) notes,

One reason for the relative neglect and, to some extent, the intellectual underdevelopment of the area is the difficulty of gaining access to the production stages, of collecting enough data to be able to provide an analytic account and to generate and test ideas (p.70).

The process of conducting production research is highly complex. Zanker (2001) acknowledges that the difficulties of access, in a New Zealand context, to the production process can be attributed to a reluctant reliance upon the cooperation of the broadcaster and producers (who are often commissioned by the broadcaster). In my case, my access to the production process was limited by the authorities of the GDTV due to some unexpected changes in the production project which occurred before I headed to Guangdong, but I received considerable support from the research subjects which enhances the value of this production research.

Overall, *TGCFs* offers an ideal research site. To be able to have access to an ongoing production of a large-scale Chinese reality series is a unique opportunity for a

researcher attempting to gain insight into the production aspect of the Chinese “Reality TV”. In considering the scale of PhD research and the limitations of my access, the production research mainly focuses on exploring the specific production history of my case study, examining production procedures, investigating some rhetorical context of the production agenda, and collecting individual and collective accounts of production experience. As Corner (1999) explains, “Production is a phase within which different dynamics of television meet” (p.70). A range of relationships are discussed in the thesis, including the encountering of the individual perspective with collective interests, the negotiations between the production team and the authorities, the interaction between the production crew and other sections, conflict between the production staff and the participants, and collaborations between the television medium and the other media forms.

There were some reasons why the production team of *TGCFs* offered considerable assistance for my research in Guangdong. Firstly, the production team members were very proud of their achievements, despite restricted operational conditions and tough working circumstances. Therefore, they were pleased to share their unique working experiences and thoughts with someone who recognized the value of their work. Secondly, they wished to have someone record their six years of working experience and personal reflections on the programme. The team was especially anxious to make a breakthrough after long years of struggling to survive in the increasingly competitive local market. They stated that would like to have someone examine their work from a distance and hopefully find a solution for reviving the popularity of the format for them. Thirdly, I developed good working relationships with key members of the production crew. They recognized my determination to conduct production research and respected my professional attitude.

In order to be well-prepared for the production research, in the pilot stage, I searched secondary sources, reviewed existing theory on the topic and looked at some of the limited examples of available academic production research. The pioneering case

study of television production was conducted by Elliott (1979), in 1967 on a production of a seven-program documentary series, *The Nature of Prejudice* in the UK. He spent about four months interviewing and observing the various stages of all aspects of the production of this series. This fine case study provided insights into the producers' experience, perceptions, and understanding of their audience impacted on their selection of subjects. The research methods Elliott applied in the research provided a paradigm for researching into the experience and interpretation of message producers in communication studies and sociological studies. As Hardy (2003) has pointed out,

Elliott's single case-study approach established a paradigmatic process for production research by undertaking detailed examination of points of decision-making: identifying critical conjunctures at which production personnel made conceptual, technical and aesthetic choices. The chronology of the production process therefore, became the organizing principle of the research. (p.118)

Roger Silverstone (1985) spent a year conducting research into the production of the BBC television documentary series *Horizon*. He closely examined one producer's daily work throughout the filmmaking period and chronologically recorded his encounter during his fieldwork in a journal format. Dornfeld (1998) studied the production of an American Public Broadcasting system documentary, *Childhood*. His research benefited from a combination of ethnographic participation, observation and interviews. This methodological approach allowed him to recognize the dynamics between production and consumption. Ruth Zanker (2001) conducted production research into a long-running New Zealand children's television series called *What Now?* She had particular interests in examining how the funding system shaped the content of programmes during the production period. She interviewed a group of key production crew members and a range of professionals and experts who were relevant to the research subject. Unlike Silverstone who generally observed sites through the entire filmmaking period, Zanker's fieldwork was a regularly-based drop in. Ann Hardy (2003) studied the development and reception of a New Zealand television

drama series, combining textual analysis with production research. She had established knowledge about television production, with a particular interest in exploring the religious and spiritual perspectives of production crew members. Instead of emphasizing on-location fieldwork, interviews were conducted at various stages of production and distribution as she sought to explore how realities of the production environment interacted with the construction of meaning.

All of these academic studies on media production were based on location observation and/or interviews with key informants. Nevertheless, different approaches to case studies suggest that the design of a production research plan can be discursive and needs to be designed case by case. Several aspects like the specific case selected, the particular perspective taken, the degree of access obtained, the relevant knowledge the researcher comes with and the scale of the research required, would all have a significant influence on the design of the production research.

4.3 The Ethnographic Approach

Corner (1999) asserts that “conducting detailed inquiries into the producing institutions and their work practices” (p.17) is an ethnographic approach to understanding media. Despite the differences in the methodological deployments mentioned above, all the studies can be categorized as ethnographic studies. An ethnographic approach can be “a powerful method of revealing why people do the things that they do” (Machin, 2002, p.1). In the case of television studies, this group of academic researchers have demonstrated that an ethnographic approach is appropriate for exploring what is going on behind the scenes of the production by examining the finer details of everyday working practice and looking more closely at the rules that make the specific production practice meaningful. Thus, this kind of approach can help researchers make better sense of how the programme makers attempted to establish a ‘preferred reading’ through the form and content of the media text and what types of institutional practices and organizational conditions were involved in the production procedure.

From early May to late December in 2006, I studied the work practices of more than twenty production crew members working for Guangdong TV station for about five months. During my research period in China, I interviewed thirty-seven people relevant to the production and observed some crucial moments and occasions in the two reality productions carried out in GDTV. Since ethnographic research is a reflexive practice, various dimensions of the research practice will be implicitly or explicitly addressed in this chapter, as well as the main body of the thesis.

Historically, an ethnographic approach to a research subject has been considered high-risk as well as high-gain. As Zanker (2001) notes, “Methodological choices made during this project reflect a faith that opening oneself to risk, and thus the possibility of a gallant failure, permits at least the possibility of new insights into a field” (p.76). The considerable dependence on the ‘benefaction’ of the researched subject and the variability of the nature of television production made me aware of the potential risk embedded in a production-based case study in the pilot stage of my PhD research. Most crucially, the foregrounding of production research relied heavily on promised access to media institutions by the production team in the first place. The design of the observational approach also depended on the fate of the production in that some projects are cancelled during production, especially if there was a commissioning or tender process taking place. The former factor, that of access, is in the hands of the production institution and the latter requires the research to be fortuitous. In addition, keeping a certain distance from the research subject to maintain a more objective standpoint could be a challenge for the researcher who is adopting an ethnographic approach (see section 4.6).

During my field research in GDTV, I encountered both these situations. I had to face some unexpected and critical occurrences, such as tensions generated by my access to the production team and the withdrawal of the scheduled production project (which will be explained later in this chapter). I had to carefully and wisely deal with these

situations, otherwise they were likely to deeply affect my research progress and could even have resulted in a failure of my entire study.

As Norman, Denzin & Yvonna note, observational research is “essentially a matter of interpersonal interaction” (2003, p.139). Besides some uncertainty generated by the research subjects, a researcher is also challenged by his/her research skills and communication capability, because the data collection relies heavily on the research subjects’ collaboration, both physically and mentally. In my case, interpersonal skills played an important role in gaining substantial support from the production team and other interviewees. Undoubtedly, an ethnographic approach to the production research is challenging, which not only reflects the amount of work in the preparation stage and the commitment of ‘being there’ for a longitudinal time, but also requires good interpersonal and problem solving skills.

Production research has proved to be an efficient and manageable research approach to this topic. Without a close investigation of the production aspect of a particular example, some latent aspects of this reality would otherwise remain unknown. In this instance, such an approach can provide insights into the distinctive aspects of the Chinese production environment by exploring the role of different production personnel, and thereby gaining some in-depth understanding of their interpretations of the nature of the programme and where it sits within the Chinese mediascape. When it is done well and going well, production research can potentially reveal rich and valuable information on cultural practices, such as in the production of Chinese “Reality TV”.

4.4 Data Collection

The deployment of the production research strategies involved a careful consideration of the appropriate methodological approach. Interviews and observation were the two methods central to the production research design for this thesis. Each method provided access to different forms of information. Interviewing worked as a major

research method for data collection. It was designed to examine various aspects of the production agenda, including the subject, production purpose, assumed audience and operational situation. It also allowed the exploration of many behind-the-scenes stories throughout the history of the *TGCF*S productions that otherwise would remain concealed.

An observation of the ongoing production provided an opportunity to closely investigate the team's working routine, method, perspective and occasion. To spend extended periods of time with the key production team allowed me to make a better sense of the different dynamics involved in the production process and to cross check the accuracy of their personal comments and the participants' reconstruction of their previous production experience.

4.5 Semi-structured Interviewing

The interview technique used for this project was semi-structured interviewing which provides the flexibility required in order to investigate various issues in relation to the topic. The practice of semi-structured interviewing involves developing questions and topics for interviews, which give direction to the interview content, without the rigidity of the questionnaire or structured interview approach Wengraf (2002). This type of interview strategy works effectively to open up various issues associated with each interviewee's personal experience and specific role(s) in the production. Interviews often can go in-depth to explore complicated behind-the-scenes stories and also have a great potential for revealing detailed information inaccessible through both textual analysis and production observation.

During the field research, some general questions (see Appendix 3) were asked of each potential interviewee to identify some common interests or contradictory encounters. Other questions were grouped into several categories that apply to the relevant potential interviewee. Supplementary, unscripted questions were asked as follow-ups to particular responses. The order in which the subsequent questions were

asked varied according to the flow of the interview. I was prepared to ask some further detailed questions, which were also “improvised in a careful and theorized way” (Wengraf, 2002, p.5).

4.6 Production Observation

Observation is “the mainstay of the ethnographic enterprise” (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987, p.257). Altheide (1996) asserts that through observation an ethnographer can “learn the language, perspectives, routines, and practical considerations to determine 'how' people do things and 'what' they actually do” (p.75). Conducting an observation in the production sites allowed me to obtain rich data from what was seen and heard while “hanging out” with the production crew members for a period of time.

Machin elicited that “good fieldwork means connecting behaviour to the wider context” (2002, p.21). This suggests that the particular production practice and personal perspectives need to be understood by looking at the way that the institution and society works and at what those practices meant to the production crew members individually as well as collectively. I further extended my understanding of their comments by looking more carefully at production talk and by connecting this to broader discourses in society (Machin, 2002). Through this process of the model for ethnographic fieldwork, previously seemingly unusual and unique opinions might become reasonable and comprehensible if understood in the context in which they happened (Machin, 2002).

The observation of the production cycles in 2006 initially was central to the design of the production research plan. However, due to a series of unforeseeable changes of the production plans (both the seventh season and *Go to the West*) taking place during my field research, I had to modify my established research plan to accommodate to circumstances that I was experiencing and witnessing in the office in GDTV. The foregrounding of the ‘current’ production seemed no longer appropriate, because the interviews and daily conversations with production crew members showed that the

production members were more interested in talking about their previous productions than the current ones. Their lack of passion for their current work and shortage of ideas for what they were supposed to do for the new project affected their responses to my questions about the “current” production projects. Compared to the fruitful historical context of *TGCFS* which emerged in the interviewing, the “current” productions, in particular *Go to the West* seemed less productive and relevant to the central case study *TGCFS* format. Also my access to the production team was restricted in GDTV, thus my exploration of the current production was limited mainly to the office and editing room. And my interviews could only be conducted before the filming team departed and after they returned four months later (which in fact was delayed for two months after I left Guangdong). Therefore, I made a decision to shift the main focus of my production research from an observation of the production to exploring the six finished seasons of *TGCFS*.

My observation of the production mainly took place in the office and occasionally in the studios and editing rooms in GDTV stations. In terms of its scale, this production observation was not very extensive. Nevertheless, during my production research period, I still had opportunities to witness some key moments in each stage of the production process. I experienced the public response to the media event, observed the casting procedure, listened into some production meetings; witnessed some creative decision-making; explored some key members’ personal reflections on their roles and the new projects; identified changes and connections between the events; caught up with several studio-based filmings of the complements (e.g. the weekly talk show and daily commentary made by a highly respected local media commentator); and had access to the editing room. Although I was unable to have a glimpse of on-location production, the various observation experiences in the headquarters had already provided rich information about the production and developed my knowledge of the production crew’s capability.

I wrote down what I saw, heard, and even felt, in detail during the production

research. All the field notes were completed as soon as I got a chance to write. This first hand behind-the-scenes experience made me aware of some issues about “Reality TV” which cannot be identified by doing a textual analysis, literature reviews or interviews. Hence, I could pursue some specific problems to be investigated in the later interviews and secondary research. This fundamental change made in my methodological approach demonstrates the nature of ethnographic research. An ethnographer needs to be flexible enough to approach the research subject and adopt a non- interventionist stance gesture to observe a cultural activity or social happening as it flows from points of view.

Production observation in this study thus was eventually used to complement some limitations of the interview method. An observation of the daily working routine in GDTV for a period of time was added to my justification of the interview content and my interpretations of the interview data. Silverman (2003) calls this “a *realist* approach to interview data” (p.343), It also provides “an opportunity to evaluate and synthesize the partial viewpoints expressed by each of the informants” (Wengraf, 2002, p.105) and allows cross checking of the authenticity and accuracy of the interview data.

It is possible that an interviewee might respond by producing common-sense or commonly-accepted reasons available for such explanations. One major task for the production observation was to look for the way that these explanations influenced interviewees’ behaviours and what they were really doing (Machin, 2002). It is important to explore whether interviewees do things as they say they do (as discussed in the sections on interviewing below). An efficient and effective way to find out how such available explanations influence behaviour was to spend time with each interviewee talking about their programmes, their production experience and the Chinese television industry in general, and a whole range of other things, so that individual comments can be properly contextualized (Machin, 2002). By comparing people’s behaviour and talk, consequently, I could identify whether there was a

misconception or there actually was a hidden agenda. Any identified rhetorical force of what interviewees say can be valuable for the interpretation of the motivation and purpose of the interviewee.

4.7 Some issues about Production Research

Although the response to my production research from the production team had been positive throughout the preparation stage, my access to the research subject was not an entirely smooth process. Shortly before I headed up to Guangdong in April 2005, the initial proposal of making an *Apprentice*-like format for the upcoming season of *TGCF*S was suddenly abandoned by the authorities of the GDTV station. The production team quickly responded to the situation by developing a new proposal for a military-based reality show. They planned to feature a group of soldiers from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) competing in some kinds of military manoeuvres. The content of the programme was thus suddenly shifted from a light entertainment show to a "politically-sensitive" programme with military content of the national defense and a clear propaganda purpose of educating the mass. With the approval of the new idea, my access to the production team became problematic for the authorities of the GDTV station. In regard to the politically challenging elements, my academic background as a media researcher from a Western university became a politically sensitive issue. Since the production crew was struggling with their own limited access to this type of sensitive subject, the leader of the production team, Hong Huang, was no longer able to take responsibility for giving approval to my research request as he had promised before. However, despite these unforeseeable obstacle of my access, the production team maintained their initial welcoming attitude that encouraged the team leader to continue to help me make the research happen.

The general caution shared by the employees of a propaganda institution suggests the difficulty of gaining access to Party-state controlled mainstream media. It was understandable that the authorities of GDTV were cautious about giving an "external" media scholar access to the politically sensitive production, because no precedent or

relevant regulations can provide a reference for them to make such a decision. My application letter was eventually handed over to government officers of The Radio, Film & Television Bureau of Guangdong Province⁶ by the General Manager of the GDTV

One week after my arrival at the GDTV, the chairperson of the Programme Center, Mr. Yan Chun, on behalf of the authorities of GDTV, was able to grant me official permission for a conditional access to the production. Technically, my research activities were restricted to the headquarters of Guangdong TV station. Due to the sensitivity of the subject of the “seventh” season, they preferred my study on *TGCFS* to be focused on the previous six seasons and suggested another travel-based reality production, *Go to the West*, as an alternative choice for the practice of my production observation. Hong Huang was formally instructed to assist my other research requests, such as helping to make contact with potential interviewees and providing available data and materials about the previous productions.

Despite the initial uncertainty about my access and the later limitations on access to the production, I was able to start my field research a month before the filming crews left their headquarters for filming in mid June, and was still able to take opportunities to observe some parts of the production of *Go to the West*. More importantly, I secured my access to the production team from then on and gained considerable support from the production crew throughout my six-month production research period.

4.7.1 Preparation for the changes

The clearance of those initial obstacles of getting access to the production did not necessarily result in a smooth process for further production research practice. The nature of television production as a type of flexible, collaborative and

⁶ All the regional-based television stations are directly subject to this kind of regional governmental institution.

highly-intensive work creates some difficulties for the researcher wanting to conduct production research in an effective and efficient way. As a researcher I faced the challenge of some common issues, such as how to approach crew members without interruption of their work; how to make the choice of what to observe while different parts of production works were carried out synchronically in different locations; and how to maintain an objective research position after a long engagement with the production. In order to minimize the possibility of a failure and maximize the research gain, I ensured that I had a detailed plan before I headed to the fieldwork, as well as before I moved to the next research stage.

As Wengraf (2002) mentions, “research which is concerned for model-*building* and model-*rectification* very frequently changes its sampling strategy as the research proceeds” (p.55). The uncertainty and unpredictability of television production nature entails a great potential for making all sorts of changes during different stages of the production. There were a number of unexpected and surprising happenings during the production research period. I had to be flexible enough to adapt quickly to these developments and constantly adjust the original research plan to be more appropriate to new situations. Some changes I made according to the unpredictable occurrences happened in the production of the new season which had some fundamental impacts on the entire production study.

The year 2006 happened to be unique in the production history of the *TGCFs* series. On the one hand, the production team intended to adopt a brand-new approach to replace the established outdoor *Survivor* formula. On the other hand, the team for the first time attempted to produce two large-scale reality series simultaneously in the summer. The crew was divided into two strands; one carried on the production of the seventh season of *TGCFs*, while the other worked on the *Go to the West* project. Unexpectedly, 2006 also eventually spelt the end of the *TGCFs* history, so that I had done my research just in time to observe the last of the series. With the prevalence of talent show based hybrid formats on domestic television channels in 2005, the

outdoor *Survivor*-style strand seemed to have completed its historical task and disappeared from television screens in Mainland China. Conducting production research in China fortuitously allowed me to experience the change of the mainstream Chinese documentary strand taking place in the domestic television screen in the year 2006 and to have an opportunity to share the production team's frustration at struggling for survival in the competitive Chinese television market.

In the initial plan of the production research, a chronological observation of the production of the seventh season of *TGCFS* was designed to play an important role in the data collection. However, the production of the upcoming seventh season did not begin by the appointed day in early summer 2006. An unexpected change in the established formula of the series happened a month before my scheduled production observation, and the later abandonment of the new project forced me to make a fundamental change in the initial research design. As mentioned in the previous section, the production research had to be shifted from its original focus on the "current" production to its production history. As a result, the exploration of production agendas was mainly dependent on a series of interviews with key production team members and volunteer contestants; therefore, the observation of the production was forced to retreat from its original role as the central data generator to a secondary supportive role.

Due to the sensitivity of the subject, I was not permitted to attend major production meetings of the "seventh" season of *TGCFS* held in GDTV and had very limited access to the relevant information and documents. However, I was still able to investigate the work of some key production personnel, such as the producers, director and cameramen during their preparation for the filming in the preproduction period. I also observed the distinct roles they played within the pre-production process. It was interesting to observe how this project failed to make it to the production stage, what kinds of decisions and changes were made during the few

months of its short life and how the production team responded to this unpleasant situation.

Being there with the key production members in the particular historical period allowed me to share their feeling and concerns, in terms of how to conquer the problem of restricted access to the subject, how to make an effective approach to the new content and how far this project could be progressed. The limited preproduction experience I had already gained lots of valuable information for my research on the production.

From June 2006 to February 2007, the production *TGCFs* team worked on the project of *Go to the West*. Since its formula, in terms of documenting ordinary people's travel experience reflects some similarity to that of the *TGCFs* formula, the crew used previously established work methods from the *TGCFs* production to produce the *Go to the West* series. As a result, the production reflected features of the outdoor survival Reality format. Although I pictured the research production landscape of *TGCFs* mainly through the wide range of interviews; to a large extent, the observation of this second production enhanced my understanding of production procedures and provided a good opportunity to make sense of various issues that were discussed during the interviews.

It is worth noting that a television production like this type of travel-based production can take a very long time to complete, and sometime it is difficult to estimate the time length of the actual filming. The production team completed their filming in Mainland China in the end of December, 2006. Unexpectedly, they could not get a working visa to travel to India to continue the second half of the filming of the series. The appointed deadline of the production was consequently postponed. The initially planned four month location filming was eventually extended to six months. I planned to finish my fieldwork by the end of 2006 when the filming project of the overseas route was still pending. By the time I left Guangzhou before Christmas, the

production crew was still waiting for the further decision to be made in Xinjiang; therefore, my observation of the production missed the first part of the post-production. Eventually, the second half of the series based in India was not broadcast either. The several problems that the production team encountered in the production process seem valuable for a better understanding of how the production environment affects the production of “Reality TV” in a Chinese context.

4.7.2 My approach to production crew and other interviewees

It is crucial for the researcher to understand how to negotiate and adjust oneself to be able to create some intimacy with a research subject, while still maintaining an objective distance. During my fieldwork, I developed a good working relationship with the production team members and other interviewees, which allowed me to continue the data collection after I returned to my research institution. Nevertheless, at the beginning of my fieldwork, having the official permission for my access to the production, the production team’s willingness to be studied, as well as my Chinese identity did not necessarily make my approach to the production team as easy as I expected.

The initial tension caused by my presence in the relatively small office can probably be attributed to my professional status and gender role as being a female media researcher from an overseas tertiary institution. The official permission merely secured my access to the team, but it was not until I established trust and rapport with the crew members one month later, that the tension about my presence completely faded away.

Besides my suspected “Western” attachment, my female gender initially was also an issue. The gender composition of the team was male-dominated. A female newcomer hanging around in the office possibly made some male members feel uncomfortable in the first few weeks. In order to sort out the problem of tension caused by my status and gender effectively and efficiently, I did not rush into extensive interviews with

the production crews when I was granted permission to study the production. Instead, I collected some essential information from the two main informants and tried to establish some trust with them first.

In my case, to establish some trust with the research subjects was crucial, in particular, the subject of the seventh season was sensitive and the production value of the studied case is controversial, as would become evident. The interviews often inevitably turned out to be a critique of the problematic issues which emerged in the production. Therefore, “gaining trust [was] essential to the success of the interviews” (Fontana & Frey, 2003, p.78) as well as the production observation.

In order to establish trust with the production crew, I started with minimizing the gender difference by avoiding showing feminine traits (in manner, language and dress code) and intended to draw people’s attention to my professional code. My knowledge about western “Reality TV” was used as an effective tool to emphasize my professional role and to encourage conversations with the two leaders and other team members, but it may have helped shape their response to my questions. For instance, I posted questions of how they were defining their format. Several members admitted that they had never thought about this issue before (This point is addressed in Chapter Five).

Once trust was established, however the advantage of being a female researcher started to manifest. I found that being a female researcher probably seemed less intimidating to a male-dominated production team. As many writings have acknowledged, “harmless or invisible” is seen as the advantage of being a female researcher (see for instance Fontana & Frey, 2003, p.83). It was often easier for me to approach an unfamiliar person and to start a conversation. Possibly as a result of this, I experienced something similar to what Fontana and Frey (2003) describe as “sometimes the interview intends to “digress” into details of interviewees’ personal histories or to recount anecdotes of their working lives” (p.83). To some extent, these

kinds of information helped me to clarify the complex relationships of the production team members and enhanced my own understanding of the dynamics of different institution. However, for ethical considerations, this material is not directly cited in this thesis. Moreover, having a selection of informants is crucial to the production research. Having insiders as informants not only saved much time in developing essential knowledge about the particular production and avoided making mistakes in the work field, but also helped me to approach other team members.

The Production Director Huang Hong and the Chief Director Han Hui were the two main informants for my production research. Huang was directly in charge of the whole production and Han took main responsibility for the artistic creation. Both team leaders had a long involvement in the production. Some main tasks these key informants performed included providing information about the production procedure and production history, helping me to make contacts with potential interviewees and offering relevant visual materials and printed documents.

In my opinion, the awareness of the gender difference and the tension created by my overseas academic background were no longer issues after six weeks of my involvement. By then, I had already developed a basic understanding of their production practice and had become familiar with their work routine and developed an easier working environment in a short period. My production research started to make further progress from then on, through conducting extensive interviews with a range of potential interviewees living in Guangdong province. It also helped me to minimize my intrusion into their work and avoid any possibility of offense. More importantly, this allowed me to develop some ideas of what further information I would like to explore and whom I would like to make further contact with.

However, I was also very aware of maintaining my professional status as an academic researcher and did not turn working relationships into personal friendships. As the production crew got used to my presence and established a good working relationship

with me, I largely became “invisible” to them. Sometimes, they obviously saw me as a part of their team. As Angrosino & Mays de Pérez (2003) argue, “[the research and informants’] behaviours and expectations of each other are part of a dynamic process that continues to grow” (p.124) which has great potential to effect the research quality.

4.7.3 Researcher’s influence

It is important to bear in mind that the ethnographic approach is a reflexive rather than a transparent way of representing reality. Denzin & Lincoln (2003) state that “a researcher speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective” (p.30). Therefore, anything about my social experience might influence the way I saw things. My ethnic identity as Chinese did not merely benefit communication; to a large extent, it helped in releasing tensions initially aroused by my professional status and gender and allowed me to quickly immerse myself into the production experience. The shared cultural background also benefited my understanding of the cultural and socio-political context associated with the programme and its production process. Moreover, most of the interviewees and I are from the same generation, born in the later 1970s to the earlier 1980s. I therefore have a better understanding of their cultural and socio-political contexts, which also influenced the respondents’ behaviour and their way of thinking.

Besides these issues, I was also aware of other things that I brought to the research, in terms of predispositions, personal biases and cultural capital. I had some working experience at a state-operated television station in Shanghai and had developed some basic knowledge about what a television production is like in China. Before I headed on to Guangzhou, I had viewed only three seasons of the series and had limited information about these productions gathered from the internet and some media journals. In order to avoid potential bias whilst maintaining professional standards, I adopted what Angrosino and Mays de Pérez (2003) called “a childlike attitude” (p.114) combined with “a theory-and-knowledge based non-naive research” (Wengraf,

2002, p.80). On one hand, I assumed that I knew nothing about the production of “Reality TV” in a Chinese context and took nothing for granted. Wengraf argues that “empathetic and un-intrusive “mirroring” is an important skill to acquire” (p.128). Using his ideas, I attempted to take a non-judgemental attitude towards the research subject. Instead of understanding the production and other people’s experience by looking at how it relates to my own knowledge, I attempted to see situations through the eyes of the research subjects and understand issues from their viewpoints. On the other hand, I had some general knowledge and concepts derived from previous Western “Reality TV” studies and some knowledge developed through previous working in Chinese TV production. When I developed my approach to the new topic, that established knowledge gave me some ideas of what kinds of further work I needed to do and what sort of information I was looking for.

During the research period in GDTV, I aimed to be a non-participant observer; however, it was often quite difficult to maintain an entirely non-participatory role during the observation process. On some occasions, the production team members asked my opinions about some aspect of the new production or needed some help when being short-staffed. As Adler and Adler (1994) point out,

[...] the observer-as-participant role was considered an acceptable compromise”, allowing the researcher to interact ‘casually and non-directively’ with subjects; the researcher remained a researcher, however, and did not cross over the line into friendship” (p.380, cited in Angrosino & Mays de Peréz, 2003, p.113).

I was very cautious about the level of my participation in the production. I tried to avoid any potential interruption to the major production process. I refused to take the role of a scriptwriter for *Go to the West* series during its pre-production stage when they were unable to find a qualified person to fill this position, but I provided some necessary help, such as answering phone calls when there was no one available to answer the phone in the office and translating some documents for the production team. I was very aware of keeping a good relationship with the production crew whilst maintaining a certain distance in order to be more objective about what I heard

and saw. In this stance, those works benefited my understanding of the production process and helped me to build up a good working relationship with the team members. For instance, answering phone calls in the pre-production offered some firsthand experience of the public response to the media event during the stage of recruiting the volunteer participants. However my involvement was limited to the brain-storming for fresh ideas of the future reality production in the upcoming season of 2007. The production asked me to share my knowledge about various formats of popular western reality TV programmes. To a large extent, this kind of involvement seemed unconnected to my own research; instead, it offered a testing ground for my exploration of the up-dated preferences of the authorities in the GDTV.

4.7.4 The Coverage of the Interviewees

With the help of the production crew and many participants, I achieved extensive interview coverage; altogether I interviewed thirty-seven people. Conducting interviews with key crew members and participants of each season and local newspaper journalists who reported the previous media events (see Appendix 2) provided me with rich information, diverse opinions and valuable knowledge about many behind-the-scene aspects and stories of the studied television production.

I started my interviews with the current production crew and gradually expanded my interview scope to the previous team members, participants and external interviewees. The selection of potential interviewees came initially through the list of cast members of each season. Not only the production team members, but also many previous participants helped me to make contact with other potential interviewees.

There are twenty interviewees from the production team. The interviews covered most of the important production crew members of all the seasons, including the production supervisors, production managers, producers, directors, editors, camera operators and the hosts. I also interviewed fifteen volunteer participants from the seven productions; a majority of whom had completed the whole journey or made

themselves to the finale, through a series' competitions and eliminations during the filming. Therefore, they generally had a comprehensive experience of the production.

It is worth noting that many of the production crew members acted in more than one role in the production process. Interestingly, there are four interviewed volunteer participants who were among those recruited by the production teams after they completed their filming, who took roles as production crew members in several later productions. Therefore, these interviewees had greater potential for having a profound understanding of the production.

However, the interviews were mainly focused on exploring the production side. Some other aspects such as programming, distribution and audience reception were merely addressed from the perspectives of the production crew, public critics and contestants, but not those of the people who have direct engagement with these aspects of distribution practice. The programming and distribution of the series had been charged by other independent departments and sections of GDTV. Besides providing me some data, the production team had limitations in assisting me to make contact with the people who had been in charge of these relevant activities in the previous six years.

4.7.5 Interview Practice

Most of the interviews took place in their work-places, such as an interviewee's offices or a conference room. Some were also set in a neighbouring café or tea house. I attempted to minimize status differences and did away with the traditional hierarchical situation in interviewing. In general, I would create a more relaxed atmosphere for the conversations, but I was still able to maintain a formal interview posture as an academic researcher.

In order to minimize my intrusion into the production environment and also in considering their practical possibility, most of the interviews with the current production team members, in particular the executive director, producers, production

managers and cameramen, were conducted during the periods of pre-production. Because the studied case is an outdoor production and adopted a quasi-live broadcasting model, during the filming most of the production members were either busy filming on locations or busy in post-production in the headquarters. Since most of the current personnel were involved in previous productions, interviews often covered questions both about their concerns of the current production and their previous experience. The interviewee often intended to compare and contrast their current roles and experience with the previous ones which generally made it easy to elicit their opinions and was helpful for me to make sense of what they were saying.

The interviews happened throughout the production research period and took place in four cities; Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Shanghai and Beijing. Many of the current production crew members were interviewed several times. Some key figures, such as Hong Huang and Hui Hang, were the major informants, because they were among few people who worked in the office on a daily basis throughout my production research. Many of their comments and thoughts were collected during our daily conversations in the office.

Due to the nature of the production as an outdoor television production, most of the team members spent most of their working days on business travel, both during the pre-production and production period. Therefore, I only managed to interview other current members when they occasionally turned up in the office during the pre-production period or in intervals during filming.

The majority of the contestants for each season of the programme and some external production professionals and previous production crew members were interviewed only once. Since many of them were not living in Guangzhou or were busy with their work in other locations, I often took one interview opportunity and managed to ask all my designed questions and discussed any specific issues with them respectively.

I failed to interview several potentially important interviewees. A producer of the first

two seasons was the only potential interviewee who refused to be interviewed; the host of the third season was unable to conduct an interview due to an unexpected health problem; an arranged interview with Qiang Chen, the Chief Director of the fifth season was unfortunately replaced by an interview with Chen's production assistant due to his extremely tight working schedule during my visit to Vhand Media Company in Beijing. I was also unable to make contact with the champion contestant of the sixth season.

4.7.6 Recording the data

Apart from some exceptional cases, the majority of the interviews were recorded on a mini-digital recorder during the interview. Most interviewees did not mind being recorded. Among the thirty-seven interviewees, thirty were tape-recorded. I also took notes of many daily conversations with the production members and made a detailed conversation record according to the notes and my memories as soon as I had a chance to, or within a day.

Tape recording the interviews was initially an issue for the team leader Huang. The tensions associated with my "overseas" researcher status in the earlier stages of my access to the team generated Huang's concern about recording the conversations, but he felt comfortable with my note-taking during the conversations. I respected his preferences and did not push other crew members to accept the tape recording. The unrecorded interviews of several production crew members which took place in preproduction was the object of Huang's concern. In order to keep my data as accurate as possible, I wrote down the key words during the conversations and reconstructed the notes according to my memory immediately after the conversations or interviews. Huang's sensitivity about tape recording the interviews disappeared after a month and I taped subsequent interviews with him. After that, no other crew member had any concern over their conversations being recorded during their individual interviews.

Overall, the majority of the potential interviewees were easy to approach and generously offered an interview opportunity. Most of the interviewees enthusiastically shared their experiences with me and openly discussed some possibly sensitive issues and topics; in particular about the previous productions. Only one interviewee requested to be interviewed off the record (neither being tape recorded nor being note-taken during the interview).

All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, and then later transcribed in Mandarin first and finally carefully translated into English. Researchers into cross-cultural communication often mention the difficulties of finding a satisfactory English translation for the expression of certain ideas or terms (McKee, 2003), and this study is no exception. There are many Chinese media, terms, idioms, jargon and famous sayings which only made sense within the Chinese cultural and socio-political context. My cultural background and media experience and bi-linguistic education allowed me to accurately understand the meaning of these Chinese-invented words or phrases (their original meanings are explained in English throughout this thesis). In this thesis, I directly quote the interviewees' comments and provide necessary background information to articulate the context. In order to ensure the accuracy of my translation of the interview data and the reference materials, I conducted extensive research on other people's writing about China in English and cross-checked with other writers' translation of the same terms or sayings.

As mentioned before, these interviews were used to explore the subjective world of the interviewee; therefore what they said should not be treated uncritically and accepted at face value (Wengraf, 2002). Corner (1999) articulates that production is "after all a process firmly within the setting of institution – many of the questions which critics and researchers want to ask of it are not easily answered" (p.70). It is particularly the case in studying a highly controversial production operated by a state-run media house. On several occasions, some of my questions seemed too sensitive to some interviewees; therefore, they sometimes gave some institutional

responses or simply refused to provide detailed explanation.

Since many interviews were focused on exploring the production history and working experience in previous productions, the comments were made and relevant information were provided according to the memory of the interviewees and in relation to their current perceptions. During the interviews about the previous production, interviewees were inevitably calling on their memory and evaluating their historical experiences from a distant position rather than drawing on the immediate responses to any issues. Therefore, the interview data contains the potential for inaccuracy and some current understandings of some issues were possibly different from their original perceptions.

Since the exploration of the production history is a major part of my case study, to entirely rely on the interview data to describe the production history and process can be problematic. There were contradictory attitudes towards the evaluation of the programme and production which generated my suspicion about subjectivity and a possible bias that shaped the interviewees' comments. The interviewee's hierarchy of position within the media institution or their attachment to the production team was taken into account while interpreting their motivations for criticizing or praising the programme and evaluating their responses and comments of the production. A wide coverage of interviewees and a long-term observation allowed me to cross-check the accuracy, authenticity and objectivity of the interviewees' responses and comments and re-examine the value of the available data.

The interviewee's individual experience is to "reconstruct the memory of the past" (Wengraf, 2002, p.117). In other words, what the interviewee provided is their personal encountering of the historical moment of a production process. Ellis and Bochner (2003) argued that "given the distortions of memory and the mediation of language, narrative is always a story about the past and not the past itself" (p.219).

In my research, I also noticed that people might not act exactly according to the

values represented by what they say. In some occasions, some interviewees' answers might not be reliable, they may have inaccurate memories or they may give self-serving answers. As Machin (2002) found in his ethnographic studies, "We cannot necessarily rely on people to be able to offer explanations for why they do things. What they will actually tell us upon asking are the official reasons that are available" (p.38).

As a researcher, I was aware of the possibility that "people do not have access to the reasons that they do things" (Machin, 2002, p. 82). I found that it was quite common that the interviewees were not conscious of their cultural or institutional framework. Although they believed that they acted with a purpose and felt things with reasons, they might not necessarily be able to provide clear and rational explanations. The questioning of several people on the same topic can provide a form of data triangulation and can minimize the potential of being misled by the interviewees. Moreover, an interviewee's personal comments about a production, given during the interviews, might be slightly different from their original perspectives. In order to avoid the detachment of personal opinion from the historical context, this issue was addressed explicitly during the interviews. Many interviewees mentioned the change of their perspectives throughout the years of the production which became an interesting aspect explored later in this thesis.

4.8 Conclusion

As Hong (1998) argued, "field research can develop a deeper and fuller understanding of the research subject" (p.9). Interpretation of the data collected from the production research explores the behind-the-scene reasons of such audio-visual presentation follows. The sufficient first hand opinion, information and knowledge of *TGCFS* production gathered through a wide coverage of interviews with the relevant people (e.g. media professionals, volunteer participants and journalists) and a longitudinal production observation (the seventh season of *TGCFS* and *Go to the*

West) in the television station are highly valuable to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the connections between the making of the survival-format programme in a state-operated provincial-level television institution and the changes taking place within the economic, political and cultural sphere in the contemporary Chinese context. The detailed and in-depth discussions of the production agenda are contained in the following chapters.

Chapter Five: The Origins of the *TGCFS*

The *TGCFS* series and many other locally produced outdoor survival format programmes are often discussed in the context of Western influence. Regarding CBS's *Survivor* as the original format modelled by Chinese outdoor survival programmes is often taken for granted by many Chinese commentators. However, this production research reveals a more complicated behind-the-scenes story of the emergence of Reality TV in China.

The *TGCFS* series was initiated by the production team themselves (not GDTV or higher-up) to explore the potential audience for new programming in Guangdong. Its basic formula is to record ordinary people undertaking a long-distance journey with constant camera observation. In the establishment of the *TGCFS* format, the programming experienced a shift of emphasis from presenting participants' travel experience to game playing. Facing an increasingly ratings-driven production environment, the *TGCFS* crew sought updated ideas from foreign popular programmes and hybridized the conventional travel documentary format to maintain a substantial audience appeal.

This chapter provides a profile of the two major popular foreign reality formats, *Airway Boys* (NTV, 1998) and *Survivor* (CBS, 2000), that the *TGCFS* format was modelled on. The production research reveals the contribution of Japanese popular factual programming on the debut of the first Chinese reality programming and explains the cultural impact of American *Survivor* on the development of the *TGCFS* series. The discussion in this chapter also highlights some major considerations that the GDTV crew had in the exercise of localizing the foreign format for a Chinese media context in the early 2000s, including initial criticism, cultural adaptability, and increasing competition.

5.1 GDTV's Travel Documentary Tradition

Before starting to explore the territory of entertainment-oriented documentary hybrid programming, GDTV had established a documentary production culture and won a reputation for making travel-based “special topic” programmes in the domestic television industry. In the early 1980s the name brand programme, *The Look of Lingnan*¹ (*Lingnan fengmao*) broadcast many “homemade” programmes about the human landscape and folk culture of the Lingnan region to local viewers. In the late 1990s, the Social-Education Sector² contributed a number of large-scale travel documentary series with a strong social-political, cultural and humanistic emphasis. For instance, the 8-episode *Mountain Climbing (Yongpan gaofeng)* (1998) documents a professional mountain climbing team taking 35 days to reach the peak of the snow-capped Everest in Himalaya. The GDTV crew made history in terms of being the first domestic television crew to reach a mountain over 6000 meters height. In the later 1990s, GDTV took a marketing risk to produce a fifty-episode documentary series, named *Exploring the South of the Yangtze River (Dajiang Nanwang)* (1996). This large-scale television series documented the scenery, culture, history and social development of the 14 provinces to the south of the Yangtze River. Following this award winning³ production, GDTV adopted a similar approach to make its sister series, *Exploring the North of the Yangtze River* (1997). The 50-episode series targeted 8 provinces in the Midwest of China and was one of the major investments and production projects of GDTV in 1997.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, traditionally documentary was state-funded and regarded as a vehicle to present official discourses. The foregrounding of public

¹ Lingnan refers to a geographic area in the south of China's “Five Ranges” which area Tayu, Qitian, Dupang, Mengzhu and Yuecheng, covering Guangdong and Guangxi Hunan and Jiangxi provinces.

² This sector was mainly in charge of making informative and educational programme to fulfil GDTV's public service function and political obligations.

³ The series won the top award in the category of “Social and Education” series in the competition of Annual Television News and Social-Education Special Topic Programmes in the Guangdong Province.

education in documentary making allowed GDTV to disregard profit making. In a non-competitive domestic television industry, documentary was often treated as a means to demonstrate the production capability of a television station. Since the Chinese government started to reduce its annual subsidy in the mid 1990s, television stations became cautious about investing in big-budget documentary projects. Large-scale travel documentaries became focused on carrying out the function of international publicity⁴. In the late 1990s, the funding of *Exploring the North of the Yangtze River* (1997) was in fact derived from the marketed-tested *Exploring the South of the Yangtze River* (1996). Although this sister series received general acclaim and became the best selling Chinese documentary programme in the international market at that time⁵, compared to popular television genres such as local television dramas, variety shows and low budget studio-based television programmes, these kind of quality documentaries did not generate high audience ratings in China.

As mentioned in section 2.2 of Chapter Two, in the later 1990s, GDTV's conventional documentary production was faced with an increasing shrinkage of the marketplace, after experiencing short term prosperity for television documentary in the first half of the 1990s (Lin, 2003). Documentary production, in particular big budget projects needed a strong audience basis to recoup their investment. In the reform era, television makers in Guangdong province struggled to generate advertising revenue in a unique local television market that had been long dominated by Hong Kong commercial television. GDTV programme makers were anxious about their living circumstances and committed to coming up with new television programmes to shake off market pressures.

5.2 *Airwave Boys: A Predecessor of Reality TV*

⁴ As the leading regional broadcaster neighbouring to Hong Kong and Macau, GDTV takes responsibility for the Party and government to promote positive images of the nation (e.g. China's current development, geographic landscape and cultural heritage) to the international society.

⁵ These well-produced sister documentary series were able to make a profit by selling to overseas television companies as a finished programme or as audio-visual materials for repackaging.

The rating success and favourable public response for Hong Kong TVB's *Airwave Boy* in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) area in 1998 allowed the GDTV documentary makers to perceive the great possibility of making a popular travel-based programme and compete for market share with other market-friendly television genres, in particular television drama⁶. This series presents a young Hong Kong man undertaking a hitchhiking challenge with a young Japanese unknown actor, travelling from South Africa to Norway from January to November in 1998. The programme was originally created by Nippon Network Television Corporation (NTV) and was a serialized segment of a high-rating comedy show, named *Susunu! Denpa Shonen*⁷ (*Don't go for it! Airwave Boys*) (1998-2002). The Japanese titled *Denpa Shonen teki Africa Europa Tairiku Odan Hitchhike no tabi* (*Hitchhiking across the Continents of Europe and Africa with Airwave Boys*) was the third of a number of intercontinental hitchhiking challenges. In 1996 and 1997 the first two pairs of challengers (Japanese comedians) had participated in a hitchhiking adventure from Hong Kong to London and Chile to Alaska, which generated audience interest for the show's predecessor *Susume! Denpa Shonen*⁸ in Japan. These two shows were very popular at that time in Japan.

The "Denpa Shonen" strand was famous for featuring "innocent" aspiring comedians trying to complete humiliating and ludicrous tasks for the purpose of entertaining the national audience⁹. Hitchhiking segments were not the only challenge that *Susunu! Denpa Shonen* had in store. Over its four year course, *Susunu! Denpa Shonen* comprised more than twenty challenges, such as living on offers and competitions in

⁶ The TGCFs crews attempt to compete with the ratings of television drama is discussed in Chapter Six.

⁷ *Susunu! Denpa Shonen* ("Susunu" means "don't go on", "denpa" means "airwave", "shonen" means "youth") (*Don't go for it! Airwave Boy*) (1998-2002). "Denpa" is a difficult to translate pun. Literally, "denpa" means airwave. It is also a slang in Japanese that refers to psychos, geeks and oddballs.

⁸ *Susume! Denpa Shonen* ("susume" means onward/forward) (*Go! Airwave Boy*) (July 1992-December 1997) (July 1992-December 1997) aired at the midnight timeslot in NTV. This earlier shows consist of weekly updates of contestants who are attempting to do seemingly impossible missions and useless feats of grand style for the purpose of entertaining the national audiences in Japan.

⁹ Japanese video shops categorized "Denpa Shonen" and many similar shows as part of the comedy sector.

newspapers and magazines¹⁰, testing the loyalty of the diehard baseball fan¹¹ and pedalling across the ocean on a swan shape boat¹².

In the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese television in fact produced a large number of programmes about “ordinary” people being filmed around the clock to complete challenges set by the producers. The television programmes involving human suffering had been extremely popular in Japan since the 1980s. Many of these shows were regarded as “freak shows” or “Extreme TV”, because they contained challenges not only bizarre and appalling, but also controversial and unethical.

The 1990s was the Golden Age for Japanese television producers for initiating ideas to create low-budget and ratings-friendly programmes. Many of the challenge segments of the Japanese variety shows in the 1980s and 1990s were arguably the predecessors of Western Reality TV. For instance, *Big Brother* shares the promise of “Nasubi”, in terms of locking people in a room and exposing their everyday living to voyeuristic cameras. *Fear Factor* takes the same approach as the Fuji TV series *Za*

¹⁰ *Denpa Shonen teki Kensho Seikatsu (Nasubi's life out of prizes challenge)* (January 1998-March 1999) was one of the most famous extreme projects of *Denpa Shonen* show. “Kensho Seikatsu” means “living on offers and competitions in newspapers and magazines”. “Nasubi” is a stage name of an unknown 23-year-old comedian who won a lottery for a show business related job and was unexpectedly confined by the producer to a tiny apartment naked with no food, no goods or entertainment except a pile of postcards and magazines. It took him one-and-a-half years to complete his goal of raising the equivalent of one million Yen (about \$10,000 USD) by living only off the winnings of the mail-in contests in magazines. Upon reaching his goal, Nasubi was blindfolded again and taken to Seoul where he had to do the same task again until he earned enough to pay for an air ticket back to Japan. His entire ordeal lasted some 15 months. He was cut off from the outside world and he had been unaware of becoming a national celebrity until the finale.

¹¹ *Denpa Shonen teki Pennant Race (The Denpa Shonen Pennant Race)* project tested the loyalties of diehard fans of the three Japan League Baseball teams. The contestants were confined to a single room with a television set that only showed their team's baseball games. Their faces would also be hidden from public view. If their team won, they got to eat dinner and a small portion of their face would be revealed to the audience. If their team lost, they would get no food and the lights would be turned out until the next day's game. The quality of the food and the portion of their face revealed to the audience depended on how many times their favourite teams won the games. If the contestant's supported team went on a losing streak, he would go for days in the dark without food. At the end of the season, the contestant would win an overall prize depending on how their team placed.

¹² *Denpa Shonen teki Mujinto Dasshutsu (Escape from desert island by Denpa Shonen Pennant Race)* was a 20th century version of Robinson Crusoe. A pair of comedians, Rocotsu Mania, were blinded-folded and ear-stuffed and taken to a desert island off the coast of Japan with no food, no tools nor clue about where they were, but with a cameraman. They were tasked to make a raft to travel back to Tokyo. After about 4 months, two participants not only survived, but also managed to escape from the island, but the producer gave them a swan shape pedal instead. When two comedians reached the mainland with it, without any delay, they were then assigned to pedal across the India Ocean (a 4000 km trip from India to Indonesia) on the same boat. These two missions took a year and a half to complete.

*Gaman*¹³ (*Endurance*) (1984), in terms of contestants enduring unpleasant ordeals. Japan also made a number of pop *Idol*-like shows about searching for singing talent and the winner could often successfully launch their career in the Japanese music business. However, Japan television industry's high degree of self-sufficiency in television programming determined that the global influence of its prosperous development of factual-based formats in 1980s and 1990s was mainly restricted in its neighbour countries and regions, including Korean, Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Moran & Keane, 2004).

In early 1998, NTV broke the national media boundary by collaborating with Hong Kong's leading commercial television company TVB. Compared with many other "Denpa Shonen" projects or other "Extreme TV" projects, the intercontinental hitchhiking challenge as a type of outdoor adventure was more easily accepted by Chinese viewers. Twenty-six year old Hong Kong DJ Zhaoren Xie was recruited to take part in the Japanese television production without knowing any detail. Zhaoren Xie and his travel partner, twenty-two year old unknown actor Ido Takashi, like their predecessors, were sent overseas respectively by the producers to carry out their tasks with no preparation and no idea of what they had to do. When they met each other for the first time at the starting point of the journey at the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, they did not understand each other's language. After the producer had announced their mission as hitchhiking to the northern most tip of Norway with a US\$ 1000 travel budget, the two contestants communicated with much difficulty in English and named their team "Panyou" ("Friend"). This unscripted pitch made a good start of the journey and eventually became the motif of the programme. Zhaoren Xie even published his travel dairy (in three volumes) afterwards and named it *Diary of Friendship* (see Figure 8)

¹³ In *Za Gaman*, university students were contestants enduring unpleasant ordeals such as bearing the most pain, eating unpleasant foods and performing the most humiliating tasks. The segments of the shows were screened on the British television programme, *Clive James on Television* and subsequently *Tarrant on TV* (ITV) in the 1980s.



Figure 8 Zhaoren Xie's *Diary of Friendship*¹⁴

The stories of Zhaoren Xie and Ido Takashi were broadcast simultaneously in TVB and NTV from January 1998. Faithful viewers turned to the television screen every Sunday night to find out the most recent developments for the two contestants as they were heading towards their goal. Many local newspapers also helped in the media exposure of this television event. During the 290 days of arduous journey across Africa and Scandinavia, the two young men demonstrated a widely claimed spirit of “never giving up”. Both audiences in Japan and the PRD¹⁵ area witnessed their personal growth, exotic cultural experience and friendship development through a half year of continuous viewing.

Airway Boys is a typical example of a transnational collaboration on a television production in the pan-Asian area. Japanese entertainment industry has been in the leading position among its neighbouring countries and regions. Its influence on the trend of entertainment programming in the East and Southeast Asian were particularly strong in the 1980s and 1990s. In the case of Mainland China, Japanese television's impact on Chinese television professionals was mainly restricted in serious documentary making and Japanese television programme's influence on Chinese

¹⁴ Zhaoren Xie published three diaries he wrote during the adventure and named them “Diary of Friendship”

¹⁵ The PRD refers to the Pearl River Delta area which includes Guangdong Province, Hong Kong and Macao. Hong Kong TVB's broadcasting signals cover the Cantonese-speaking PRD area.

audience was mainly limited in television dramas¹⁶ (Guo,1997 and Su, 2006) .

In that period, various popular Japanese entertain television programmes were widely modelled by television makers in Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Due to a lack of access to foreign programmes in the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese television professionals often experienced the original ideas of a Japanese television programme via a Hong Kong or Taiwanese cloned version. Hong Kong aired *Airway Boys* provided GDTV television makers a rare direct access to the most updated Japanese television format. *Airway Boys* presented Hong Kong and Guangdong viewers a documentary look programme with a light entertainment feast. To a group of documentary makers in GDTV who were seeking for a new approach to make a rating friendly documentary, the hybrid format of *Airway Boys* provided a good paradigm.

5.2.1 The Emergence of an Outdoor Sports Culture

The content and the format of *Airway Boys* also enlightened the GDTV programme makers. As noted in a local scholarly media journal's special edition of *TGCFs*,

In recent few years, with the rise in the standard of living in Chinese society [...]. Many activities of self challenge-oriented survival experience are booming. Media coverage of such activities has been frequent. Phoenix Satellite Television and CCTV's live broadcast of film stunt Shouliang Ke flying over the Yellow River by a motorbike, Shanghai Television's recording of Chunshun Yu hiking across Lop Nur desert¹⁷ and Guangdong Television's documenting of climbing Mt. Zhanzi¹⁸ all

¹⁶ The collaboration between Mainland China and Japan in the field of television production began at the end of 1970s, but the coproduction was restricted in serious documentary making in 1980s (Su, 2006). The earliest coproduction was a television documentary series, named *The Silk Road*. It was made by television professionals from CCTV and NHK in 1979.

The directly imported Japanese television programmes appearing on the national television was TV dramas. Sharing the same Confucian cultural values, a number of Japanese television dramas achieved high ratings in China since earlier 1980s.

¹⁷ In June 1996, a Chinese traveller, Chunshun Yu attempted to hike across the mysterious Lop Nur desert in the summer which is considered an impossible task. A four-member documentary team from Shanghai Television's *Documentary (Jilupian bianjishi)* (1993-) took cameras to follow Yu's departure on his desert exploration and planned to record the moment of his triumph at his finish point. With the involvement of the television production, Yu's challenge soon became a high profile value news story. However, this story ended in the death of the protagonist.

¹⁸ GDTV's eight-episode documentary, *Mountain Climbing (Yongpan gaofeng)* (1998)

evoked resounding public response [...]. The emergence of some overseas life experience format programmes, such as Hong Kong's *Airway Boys* were all great inspiration to us (*South China Television Journal*, 2004, p.3)

This direct quote of a GDTV official's comment in the publicity of the inaugural season of the *TGCFS* listed some major factors influencing on the decision making of launching the *TGCFS* production project. Several mentioned high-profile real life stories which not only generated news media interest, but also raised the public's curiosity about outdoor adventure in the late 1990s.

With the increase in the average income of Chinese urban households, in particular those located on the east coast, outdoor sports were no longer a professional and privileged activity in China. Many everyday Chinese people had the means to pursue outdoor activities and to engage in travel abroad. An outdoor sport culture had first emerged in some major urban cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen since the mid 1990s. Similar to the emergence of the backpacker trend in the West, many educated, affluent, fashionable urban youth were no longer satisfied with the predominant travel model, in terms of a high budget, comfortable transportation, secure accommodation and superficial cultural experiences. Instead, they started to appreciate some first hand personal encounters with local people and culture in remote areas and a self challenge of their survival skills.

No doubt, *Airwave Boy's* "prank"-like approach, in terms of sending two blindfold young men to an exotic location and asking them to complete some "extreme" tasks initially was controversial to Chinese viewers. Nevertheless, with their motivation of completing the mission being changed from a producer's compulsion to a self motivated action after a few months of struggling to quit the filming, the primarily "prank" style mission turned to a meaningful challenge and viewers were moved by two young men's determination and the spirit shown in their dramatic real life experience.

Zhaorenxie and Ido Takasi's adventure in *Airway Boys* demonstrates the core idea for the outdoor sports culture, in terms of enhancing people's direct contact with nature and encouraging individual triumphs over the difficulties and hardships encountered during the challenging experiences. Therefore, this Japanese programme met the need of Chinese urban audiences, including Hong Kong audiences. Zhaorenxie and Ido Takasi were presented as hero-like figures admired by the viewers. To some extent, this phenomenon echoes those Chinese real-life adventurers who were portrayed as the praised cult figures by domestic media narratives in the 1990s. *Airway Boys* was another example demonstrating that outdoor sports had a growing popularity among the Chinese urban middle-class in the late 1990s. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter Two, the prevalence of various factual-based programmes in domestic television channels, such as talk shows, life-style shows and crime/law enforcement programmes in the 1990s proved that Chinese viewers enjoyed watching programmes about the lives of average Chinese people. The popularity of *Airway Boys* turned two previously unknown young men into instant celebrities in both Japan and the broadcast PRD area. This hybridized format also proved to Guangdong television makers that featuring everyday people's backpacking travel experience seemed more interesting and socially relevant compared to traditional travel documentary.



Figure 9 The First Season: *Tracing China Overland Border* (2000)

Based on these facts, GDTV programme maker assumed that there would be a great potential to replicate the public interest and ratings success of the *Airway Boys* by making a localized version in a Chinese context. The planned scenario of the

inaugural season of the *TGCFS* was to record a minimal-budget (¥ 4000, about US\$ 500 per person) adventure featuring ordinary Chinese contestants (one female and two males) travelling along the China overland border (about 38,000 kilometres) for a long period of time (six months) (see Figure 9). Unlike the survival challenges in many Japanese shows which delivered viewing pleasure through watching the suffering of contestants, this local programme was made to inspire young urban Chinese (who were widely criticized for taking modern day conveniences for granted and displaying a shortage of survival skills) to be closer to nature and to challenge personal limitations. In fact, the official theme of the *TGCFS* series was “Human and Nature, Human and Life, Human and Culture”.

5.2.2 Life Experience Format

In 2000, “Reality TV” as Western derived term was not widely known by Chinese television professionals. “Special topic” programme was instead used as a convenient term to label this kind of new factual programme which displays a strong documentary style. In terms of the format, the crew members of the *TGCFS* like to define their programme as a “life experience” format. Its basic concept is to document people carrying out “given tasks” in a contrived situation. This “life experience” format has also been argued as originally deriving from Japanese variety shows from the 1980s and 1990s (Xie, 2006).

In late 1990s, the “life experience” formats often appeared in teenage-targeted programmes. Teenagers were required to complete various given tasks for the purpose of testing their social abilities, problem solving skills and independent living skills in those earlier “life experience” format programmes. Unlike the survival challenges in the Japanese show which delivered viewing pleasure through watching the suffering of contestants, such localized Chinese “life-experience” programmes were made to educate and inspire new generations of Chinese who were widely criticized for a lack of a sense of independence and a shortage of survival skills (a legacy of China’s

single child policy).

It can be said that featuring members of the public experiencing a staged real life situation was not an entirely new format for GDTV television makers. Likewise, some ideas of Japanese “extreme” challenges could be localized to adapt to the Chinese media and social contexts. Evidently, the *TGCFS* team did not blindly copy the *Airwave Boy* format. In producer Jian Zhao’s words, “we wanted to make a type of programme which accords with the situation of our country” (personal communication, August 9, 2006).

Although the *Airway Boys* proved to have strong audience appeal for local viewers, the GDTV programme makers had to take the Chinese situation into account while localizing this Japanese format. In the programming of the *TGCFS* format, the GDTV crew abandoned the “prank” element/concept of the Japanese “Denpa Shonen” formula, in terms of creating a media spectacle by blinded-folding and ear-stuffing the “innocent” participant to conduct a seemingly impossible mission. In the *TGCFS* production, the Chinese volunteers had been well informed, prepared and even trained before they headed to the outdoor adventure. This kind of modification was necessary to produce a *Airway Boys*-like programme in a Chinese context.

5.2.3 Concerns of Safety

To organize an adventure-based media event, the safety of the crew and participants was a large concern for the *TGCFS* team. Director Hong Huang claimed that “safety is the most important aspect to be taken into account during the production” (personal communication, June 1, 2006). The proposal of making *TGCFS* initially did not receive support from the authorities at GDTV. The proposed large-scale “outdoor survival” programme was considered to be a high risk project. The risk was mainly assumed to be from taking ordinary Chinese people to travel to many remote areas along China’s overland border. Producer Xiaoming Li points out the perceived impact

of the worst scenario (a possible death) happened during filming. He says that “it would be a big lash on the reputation of the television station” (personal communication, November 30, 2006).

The launch of *TGCFS* was a unique example in Chinese television making history. The “conservative” institutional concerns did not affect crew leader Xüyang Sun’s determination of challenging the new television format production to achieve his professional goal of producing a good quality programme¹⁹. Sun personally invested ¥ 300,000 (US\$ 37,500) as the start-up budget to get the project up and running²⁰.

In order to dispel officials’ worries, the *TGCFS* crew adopted several strategies to enhance the safety of the participants while travelling in the economically undeveloped and remote area. Sun prepared an international maritime satellite telephone for the filming crew which allowed the filming crew to make an urgent call anywhere during the journey. The production team also purchased ¥ 400,000 (about US\$ 50,000) of travel insurance for each participant²¹. During the filming on location, the crew would adjust the travel route and supervise participants’ decisions to avoid any risk taking. For instance, the tent was only opened three times during six months of outdoor adventure due to the production team’s great concern of safety. The producer would assess the security of camping outside according to the situation. Despite the tight travel budget, the three participants would often end up sleeping in cheap inns/hostels or spent a night in local people’s home. No doubt, the foregrounding of the safety in the filming sometimes lead to a sacrifice of the authenticity of the survival experience and possibly made the outdoor survival

19 In 1996, Sun took a risk to raise funds from the employees in Guangdong TV to produce a 50-episode documentary series, *Exploring the South of the Yangtze River*. He promised to return the money with 30% of interest after half a year. This well-produced series not only earned back the production cost and the high interest within the promised time restriction, but also a won reputation for GDTV in the domestic television industry and generated profits for GDTV from overseas television markets. The success of *Exploring the South of the Yangtze River* series eased the way for authorities in GDTV to invest in its sister series, *Exploring the North of the Yangtze River*. This production became one of the major investments for GDTV in 1997.

²⁰ Shortly before the start of the filming, the *TGCFS* found a sponsorship for the production (see Appendix 4).

²¹ The crew member had ¥200,000 insurance (about US\$24,000) per person which was much less than that for participants.

challenges seem less breathtaking compared to those in *Survivor*²². Despite the fact that the *TGCFs* team made great efforts to ensure the safety of the participants, this programme still received criticism from the public.

Shortly after the finish of the debut of the *TGCFs*, CCTV's top rating talk show, *Tell it Like it is (Shihuashihuo)* (2001) invited three participants to join a studio discussion about their survival experiences in front of the camera in February 2001. Chinese popular magazine *New Weekly* reported that during more than two hours of arguments in the CCTV studio, audience and guests criticized the production approach, in terms of placing ordinary people into dangerous circumstance for the sake of pursuing high ratings (Long, 2001).

It can be said that to ensure the safety of participants was the foremost issue that the GDTV crew had to deal with in order to localize a foreign reality format. The foregrounding of such an issue not only reflects the nature of the television station as a public service and governmental institution in China, but also suggests that Chinese television makers have to face a political risk while making reality format involving physical dangers and ethical impropriety in China. In order to bring the first Chinese reality project to life and avoid punishment from censorship, the *TGCFs* producers needed to have a pioneer spirit and be able to strategically negotiate the ways of achieving their goals, including sacrificing the authenticity of their production approach to ensure the safety of the participants and the popularity of the series.

5.2.4 The Crew's Pioneer Spirit

Despite the audience's speculation on the value of outdoor survival format, an increase in public awareness as well as central television's expression of "interest" (CCTV and GDTV are rivals in the domestic satellite television market) proved that

²² The issue of authenticity in regard to programme maker's intervention to "real life" experience was discussed in Chapter Six.

the *TGCFs* format was capable of drawing public awareness in China. The successful launch of the inaugural season was largely attributed to team Leader Xūyang Sun's professional judgment and commitment to impel the production project to the filming stage. However, using personal investment to initiate a big-budget production was rare in China's state-operated television stations, which had operated with an "iron-rice bowl²³" model of lifetime employment for their entire history. Sun's pioneering spirit in exploring new television programming and his ambition to produce good quality television programmes were crucial factors in the successful launch of *TGCFs* in early 2000. This was a source of pride for those involved in the pioneer production and nurtured a strong spirit of dedication in the production team. This situation also highlights the conflict of interest that can emerge between the production team and the institution within which they operate.

State employed programme makers often struggled to achieve their artistic ambitions in a conservative environment governed by the narrow programming concerns of the authorities of the state-run stations. In a deregulated and immature television industry, improvements in Chinese television production sometimes had to depend on personal initiatives rather than reforms from the top. The example of the emergence of the flagship provincial-level Hunan Satellite Television in the later 1990s demonstrated that if television operators and professionals strictly obeyed the regulations and norms, they would miss opportunities for development and eventually lag behind in the market competition in this new age (Li and Zhang, 2002)

Based on the GDTV crew's previous production experience of making travel programmes, they also attempted to hybridize conventional travel programming to enhance its entertainment value by integrating drama techniques. Some new elements were adopted to ensure local audience appeal including the exotic scenery along the China overland border, a gender mix of contestants for potential love affairs and the

23 "Iron rice-bowl" (tie fan wan) used to be a dominant Chinese human resource management system adopted by state-owned enterprises before the mid 1990s which "ensured 'jobs for life' and 'cradle to grave' welfare for mostly urban industrial state-owned enterprises employees" (cited in Ding, Goodall and Warner, 2000).

suspense of using ¥4000 (about US\$ 500) to travel around the country for six months. The new programming distinguishes *TGCFS* from its Japanese origin and was assumed to be able to create more interesting stories than *Airwave Boys*²⁴.



1 Filming three participants approaching to the terminal of Dandong



2 Local people following three participants walking across the city



3 Participants arriving at the finishing point



4 Participant Dao Lü joining in the local style celebration

Figure 10 Snapshots of the finale

Up to early 2000, travelling as a backpacker around the country was rare and Chinese people's access to the relevant information was limited due to the low ratio of access to the internet. These conditions provided a good opportunity for the outdoor survival reality format to raise massive public interest. With an increase in public awareness of the series, GDTV operators changed their previous attitudes towards the show. In the New Year Day of 2001, a hundred-member team with tons of filming equipment was sent to north China to conduct a live broadcast of the finale. Regular television schedules were changed to serve the needs of the three hour live broadcast. Such

²⁴ The discussion of the dramatic approach of the *TGCFS* format making is covered in Chapter Six.

arrangements clearly demonstrate that the *TGCFs* series became the most important production in GDTV by the end of the season.

Figure 10 presents a glimpse of the live broadcast. Thousands of citizens in the city Dandong in Liaoning province went on the street to witness the arrival of three participants in the heavily snowing day. The great atmosphere presented in the live broadcast proved to the authorities of GDTV that this *Airway Boys*-style format had good prospects, in terms of developing into a name brand programme of GDTV.

Here GDTV crew also made history in Chinese television making by relying on microwave signal transformation techniques²⁵ to transmit three hours live broadcast across the town located thousands of miles away from the headquarters. Nowadays, superstations in China all own satellite broadcast vehicles which make it easy to conduct an outdoor live broadcasting. However, in the early 2000s, restricted by available technology and technique support, regional television stations rarely conducted large-scale live broadcasts in other regions. The GDTV professional's 'pioneer spirit' encouraged them to explore their potential in successfully producing a live broadcast. As Producer Jian Zhao claims that

[The first season] was not a commercial-driven production. [...] We wanted to make a good quality television programme to inspire the audience, and consequently it would generate high audience ratings and bring along advertising revenue (personal communication, August 9, 2006).

Zhao's comment emphasizes the important role which the crew's professional ambition played in the making of the *TGCFs* series. Although the crew wisely showed good timing in launching *TGCFs* and achieved great success in its debut, many issues (e.g. participants' problematic collaboration with the filming crew and a

²⁵ Microwave signals merely travel in a straight course which makes it difficult to conduct a live broadcast, because shooting the moving object walking across the town involved many changes of direction. The microwave receiver then would lose signals after each turn.

high demand for dramatic stories) which emerged in the production of the inaugural season also made those local producers aware of some of the disadvantages of recycling the established production formula in an increasingly ratings-driven production environment.

With the boom of the outdoor sports industry, the prevalence of internet access and the mushrooming of outdoor survival format programmes, the Chinese viewer had more choices of *Survivor*-like programmes and more channels for accessing outdoor sport information. Therefore, the *TGCFS* format no longer had much advantage in being the pioneer production. In order to improve production quality and satisfy the assumed audiences' needs, the production team was constantly looking for better ideas from overseas popular reality-based shows.

5.3 *Survivor* : A Paradigm of Gamedoc

CBS's *Survivor* is the other important production that influenced the format development of the *TGCFS*. It chronicles the "back-to-basics" life of sixteen average Americans in a tropical island and "the fierce competition for prizes through their own wit" (Foster, 2004, p.271). As a result, the *TGCFS* series has often been placed by media critics and social commentators within the category of *Survivor*-style format. However, prior to the inaugural season of the *TGCFS*, GDTV programme maker had not watched the *Survivor* series. It was not until the preproduction period of the second season that the *TGCFS* crew had access to the original season of CBS's *Survivor*. This high-rating reality programme generated great interest among Chinese television professionals and scholars when it first appeared in CCTV2's night programme *Earth Story*²⁶ in August 2001. As Programme Consultant Hong Xi²⁷

²⁶ This programme mainly consists of imported documentaries and factual-based programmes with subjects of nature, geography and humanity. In March 2005 the programme also broadcast the third season of *Survivor* and aired the six to seventh seasons of *Amazing Race* in July.

²⁷ Hong Xi (also named Dalang Xi) is a reputable television programme developer and programming consultant in Chinese television industry. His proposal won the bid for the production design of the fourth season of *TGCFS* series (see Chapter Ten). He has acted as the consultant of the series since then. Hong Xi is also the Vice-Secretary

stresses,

The introduction of *Survivor* format had a great influence on Chinese television makers. In the past, [factual] television genres were divided into three main kinds, news and information programmes, “special topic programme”[...]. [This new television format] challenged our established knowledge of the television genre (personal communication, August 9, 2006).

The research found that CBS’s first season of *Survivor* was the earliest Western reality format to screen on domestic television screen. The dubbed version added a host’s narration for story-telling and cut down the original 45 minutes episode to 20 minutes by editing out scenes containing elements of sex, nudity, religion and the cash prize, in order to adapt to the Chinese broadcasting environment.

The unique geographic and media environment in Guangdong Province enabled television programme makers to experience the *Survivor* format slightly earlier and in more complete form than their peers in other regions. Producer Jian Zhao mentions that

In late 2000, Guangdong viewer could watch the original version of the CBS’s *Survivor* through TVB’s Pearl Channel. Guangdong TV programme makers have benefited from having access to two Hong Kong English TV Channels [TVB’s Pearl Channel and ATV’s World Channel] which broadcast many up to date high quality global television productions (personal communication, August 9, 2006).

Although CBS’ first *Survivor* was “the most popular surveillance-based reality show of the summer” (Andrejevic, 2004, p.1) in the US, a similar kind of success did not occur in China (including Hong Kong) in the early 2000s, leading to the GDTV’s speculation on the reasons why both the original version in TVB’s Pearl Channel and

of the Research Organization of Chinese Television Arts Theory which is a subsidiary organization of Chinese Television Association. Currently, he is the Creative Supervisor a Beijing-based media company, called Guanhua Movie and Television Organization and also acted as the programming consultant for CCTV, Phoenix TV and Star TV.

the re-cut version of *Survivor* on CCTV2 was unable to generate wide viewing interest among the Chinese audience.

Apart from the language barriers of the original English-language version in ATV and the reconstruction of the initial episodes in the CCTV, the Chinese media theorist Hong Xi considers that cultural context was the main reason for its unsatisfactory ratings performance. He argues that,

Survivor was unable to create a ratings hit in China, because it did not suit the viewing taste of Chinese audiences. [...] The localization of this type of television format needs to be on the basis of the specific situation of this country, the aesthetics and the mass preference of the competition model (personal communication, November 19, 2006).

This was a typical comment that represents the mainstream public concerns of the localization of the Western *Survivor* format in China. Although the market-tested *Survivor* format demonstrates its great potential to achieve ratings success in various cultural contexts and market environments, the practice of localizing the global format is far more complicated than simply following the industry “bible” or “creatively” borrowing the concept. In Chinese circumstance, it seems that not only the directly imported *Survivor* series, but also with the adapted *Survivor*-style format it carried a high level of “cultural discount”²⁸ (Hoskins and Mirus 1998).

Andrejevic (2004) argues that “*Survivor* as an attempt to naturalize the (Darwinian) logic of contemporary economic competition by transporting it to an archetypal extrasocietal location” (p.196). There is an explicit clash between the capitalistic values and socialist ideologies while making *Survivor* format in a Chinese context. Its encouragement of gambling and cruel competition and exploitation of sex and privacy have been widely critiqued by Chinese scholars and public commentators (see Yin, 2006 and Xie & Chen, 2007).

²⁸ The concept was elicited by Hoskins and Mirus who argue that “a particular programme rooted in one culture, and thus attractive in that environment will have a diminished appeal elsewhere as viewers find it difficult to identify with the style, values and behavioural patterns of the material in question” (1987, p.23).

According to one of the earliest research reports about “Reality TV” in China contributed by Chinese television professionals and scholars in the early 2000s, the “last people standing” formula of *Survivor* was criticized as “exposing human nature at its worst. To win the game by fair means or foul is based on Darwinism which is against the moral ideals of inter-tolerance and peaceful coexistence” (CCTV & Qinhua University, 2002, p.48). This explicit cultural clash occupies many Chinese television professionals and commentators’ attention and dominates their attitudes towards *Survivor* format.

Oriental countries such as China, Japan and Korea all share the values of Confucianism, in terms of practicing harmony and moderation (Hall & Roger, 1998). Therefore, the idea of encouraging contestants to distrust each other and conducting a “cut throat” competition to secure a place in the Western competition also contained a cultural clash in the localizing of the *Survivor* format in those Asian countries. For instance, Japanese Tokyo Broadcasting System’s (TBS) launch of the local version of *Survivor* in April 2002 was considered a marketing failure. Iwabuchi (2004) explores the struggle of the Japanese producers in navigating the production approach according to the contestants’ national characteristics and the Japanese cultural context by foregrounding the contestants’ emotional experience in the stage-managed extreme situation and emphasizing collectivistic logics and friendship amongst the contestants. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, “friendship” as a motif of the TVB screened *Airway Boys* was well adapted to the Chinese cultural context and assumed viewing interests of Chinese viewers, including Hong Kong viewers. The key to successfully localize the global reality format, in Chinese scholar Hong Yin’s words, is “find a balance between entertainment and ethics” (2006, p.224).

Western media researcher Jerry Clode (2003) remarks that “CCTV presents *Survivor* as a psychological survey of *Homo Americanus* in prime-time. An instructive narration prevented any chance of unhealthy interpretation” (p.64). To a certain extent, this typical Western comment contains some critical bias. According to other sources,

the modification of the original versions of *Survivor* by CCTV was mainly attributed to the limited length of the programme *Earth Story*, China's media censorship of media content and a prohibition of directly broadcasting imported overseas television programmes on air. As Chinese media experts Hong Xi observes, "the main content of *Survivor* was largely preserved" (personal communication, August 9, 2006) which allowed domestic viewers to have a taste of most updated Western television programming.

Despite an impassive public response to the original *Survivor*, this new Western reality format raised great interest among Chinese television makers to produce a local version in with a group of ordinary Chinese carrying out *Survivor* style contest and challenging "back-to-basics" existence somewhere in China. *Into Shangri*²⁹ (Vhand, 2001) was one of the earliest variations on a *Survivor* format. In the same year, based on a close look at the original *Survivor*, the *TGCFS* team decided to integrate some *Survivor* elements into the established format to enhance the entertainment value of the programme. In consideration of their production capability and the Chinese unique cultural and socio-political context, the GDTV programme makers realized that to entirely copy the *Survivor* format was not feasible. Producer Huang Hong responds to the crew's specific approach to *Survivor*-style competition that

Many Western reality shows focus on exposing human nature through back stabbing. In this Chinese reality show, this aspect should be avoided because it was not suitable for Chinese ways of thinking and aesthetic habits [...]. We did not expose too much vicious nature of human beings. In contrast, we emphasise righteousness, friendship and emotions (personal communication, June 7, 2006).

Although the local crew had great concerns about applying a *Survivor*-style

²⁹ This programme was produced by a Beijing-based private-owned production company, namely Vhand Culture & Media Company. It features sixteen Chinese contestants living for thirty days as a team in the Yunnan countryside in southwest of China with only meagre rations and ten matches. The prize is planned to help in fulfilling the winner's dream.

competition to their hitchhiking format, they recognized the potential for localizing the Western formula to adapt to a Chinese situation. More importantly, the crew was aware that the strategies of conducting periodical elimination, competing for immunity and holding a tribal council in *Survivor*'s competition formula could bring drama to the day-to-day travel. From the second season, this localized Chinese hybrid format displayed a combination of a contrived scenario of a group of ordinary people carrying out various survival challenges in primitive living circumstances and playing games in remote locations (this aspect is discussed further in Chapter Eight).

5.3.1 Infotainment Approach

In considering GDTV's production capability and China's media environment, the *TGCFS* team adopted an infotainment approach to foster strengths and circumvent weaknesses. The local producer created this Chinese-style hybrid format by blending the global *Survivor* formula with a Chinese cultural agenda. Director Hong Huang clarifies the fundamental differences between the *TGCFS* format and the *Survivor* format. He says that

Firstly, the *TGCFS* is a travel-based contest format in which the survival environment constantly changes. Secondly, the *TGCFS* is closely associated with a survival environment and modern society, and has interactions with local people (personal communication, June 1, 2006).

Physical survival is one of the key concepts shared by the *TGCFS* format and the *Survivor* format. However, the two productions chose to place contestants in different circumstances. The commercially-driven *Survivor* fully displayed its gamedoc nature, in terms of focusing on portraying each castaway's alliances and betrayals; whereas the Chinese production team recognized their unique strength as having sufficient cultural resources to add significant infotainment value and displaying a strong Chinese flavour.

CBS's high-rated *Survivor* is an exemplar of world leading commercial entertainment

programming which allowed GDTV producers to be more aware of their weaknesses in reality programme making. *Survivor* as a big-budget production included more than one hundred crew members equipped with the latest in high-tech audio-video gear with a range of formats of images taken by film camera, DV camera, and infra-surveillance camera to aerial footage shot from a helicopter (Andrejevic, 2004, pp.196-197). It had the appearance of a Hollywood film production. A forty-five minutes episode blends the traits and attributes of drama, game show and documentary. Director Hui Han provides a typical comment that,

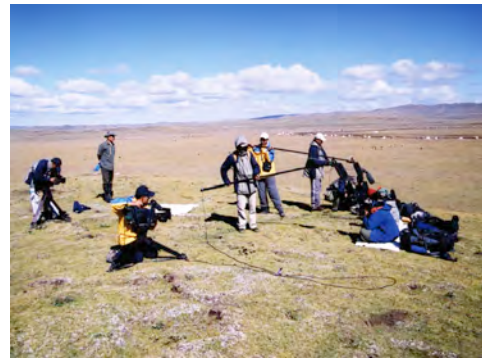
Apparently, *Survivor* is a very well-designed formula with a high production quality. Every aspect of the production, including the game design, props, lighting, cinematography, sound techniques and editing, all represent a world class standard (personal communication, August 14, 2006).

Due to the lower production budget, smaller production scale, limited production capability and restricted post-production time frame, GDTV despite being one of the superstations in China was unable to achieve such a high standard of production quality as that exhibited by the CBS-produced *Survivor*. In the early 2000s, *TGCFS* was a major large-scale non-fictional production project for GDTV. The Chinese team was comprised of around twenty well-trained and experienced television professionals selected from different production teams and sectors in the Guangdong television station. The regular crew members included producers, directors, cameramen, editor, technicians, medical staff and transportation coordinators which represented a typical lineup and size of a large scale travel-based documentary.



1 Interviewing the participant

2 Recording a consistent action



3 Capturing a moving action

4 Filming the tribe council

Figure 11 working photos of the crew

An average of three professional DV cameras and sound recording devices are the standard equipments of the *TGCFS* production (see Figure 11). Compared to the amateur-looking *Airwave Boys*³⁰ which was filmed by a two-member crew (consisting of a director and a cameraman), this so-called “large-scale” Chinese production may demonstrate a higher level of professionalism, in terms of the size of the production team. Nevertheless, the *TGCFS* crew was unable to replicate a *Survivor*-style game playing to attract viewers. The team was short on relevant experts to fully take care of prop design and set building. This weakness was primarily caused by the problematic institutional system of the television station which created many obstacles for the programme makers in building their production design. In order to achieve an integrated commercial television production like *Survivor*, state-owned television stations including GDTV had to coordinate different sectors (including the sectors of production, settings and props, advertisement and distribution) and enhance the efficiency of their collaboration (This issue is further explained in Chapter Nine).

³⁰ Although NTV did not disclose the budget of the show, it can be estimated that the production costs were low, because the trip was a minimal-budget hitchhiking travel across mainly third world countries and the contestants on the show were aspiring actors whose salaries were at the bottom of the pay scale of the Japanese media industry (Herskowitz, June 22, 1998).

After recognizing their weaknesses, the *TGCFs* crew sought their own means to localize the *Survivor* format and develop their own format to cater to Chinese viewing interests. Facing a distinctive production environment and a growing interest in travel among emerging Chinese middle-class households, *TGCFs* producers insisted on maintaining the established travel-based formula from the successful *Airway Boys* format and sought to encourage interaction between the contestants and local people during their journey. No matter that it was an adventure along a domestic travel path (e.g. national borderline, the Long March route, the Yellow River route, the Silk Road) or in overseas locations (e.g. Saipan, New Zealand, Greece and Canada), the selection of the travel routes were often rich in natural resources and cultural spectacle (see Figure 12).



1 Queenstown in New Zealand in the 3rd Season 2 Tianning Island in Saipan in the 3rd Season



3 The Silk Road in China in the 4th Season 4 Arctic in Canada in the 6th Season

Figure 12 Survival challenges around the world

The content of *TGCFs* was also given an emphasis on cultural encounters along the

travel route. At the beginning of each episode and every time the participants arrived at a new location, a voice-over was used to provide audiences with information about the regional culture, history and geography in each stop. The domestic travel routes crossed regions inhabited by various ethnic groups in compact communities. Therefore, local producers took full advantage of China's cultural diversity. With the regional government's assistance, producers obtained valuable information about the local cultural activities and gained access to the local community.

The design of the games and tasks were often closely related to regional culture and customs. As in *The Amazing Race*, contestants in the local format were often asked to mimic local cultural traditions and participate in local cultural life, such as making local dishes, creating art crafts/souvenir and exercising cultural activities (see Figure 13). This kind of approach minimized the need for creating game devices and building sets which was considered a weakness of the local production team. Moreover, the cultural elements displayed in the game design not only maximized the entertainment value of the production, but also made the journey and media event rich in cultural and extraordinary experiences.



1 Playing traditional game in China



2 Making coconut craft in Saipan



3 Selling homemade sandwich in New Zealand



4 learning to be a street entertainer in Canada

Figure 13 Playing games around the world

It is argued that the key to the localization of the global television format in a Chinese context was not only to find a subject matter that catered to local viewers, but also to present it in a way which suited local audience viewing habits and was acceptable for the socio-political condition (Lou, 2005). This kind of strategy seems not only beneficial for legitimizing the state-employed producer's attempt to localize the *Survivor* format in a government-censored domestic television market, but also for potentially minimizing any "unfavourable" Western cultural influence (i.e. gambling, voyeurism, individualism, excessive competition, the exhibition of a naked human nature) introduced by the ethically controversial global reality trend into an ideologically-controlled public space.

5.3.2 Ethical Considerations of Privacy

An important ethical issue raised in the localizing of CBS's *Survivor* was privacy. The US team used fly-on-the-wall cameras and infra-red surveillance cameras to achieve an intimate access to the subject for the purpose of delivering voyeuristic pleasure. Western scholars and commentators widely criticized "Reality TV [as] a form of voyeurism" (Cummings, 2002, p.xv). The invasion of people's privacy (except for stars and singers' privacy) for the purpose of making television programmes to entertain the mass audience was clearly unacceptable in China. Director Tao Lin comments that

We do need to be cautious about dealing with the issue of the contestants'

privacy, because there has been a long existing argument about the degree of the exposure of privacy in reality programmes among viewers. Our production mainly presented contestants' emotional release and stressed their emotional expression, which could evoke a strong echo in viewers (personal communication, July 9, 2006).

The *TGCFS* crew would gain consent from the volunteers on the matter of the invasion of their privacy and formally inform them about their responsibilities for collaborating with the production team. Before they headed to filming, participants were required to sign a contract with the television station under the supervision of a public notary. However, in considering the ethical sensitivity of the issue, programme makers generally had to respect participants' own wishes. How much of their privacy was allowed to be shown to the audience, to a large extent, was determined by the participants rather than by the producers. This kind of approach shared similarities with *Airwave Boys*, which emphasized its sensational appeal rather than voyeuristic entertainment³¹.

5.4 Conclusion

It can be concluded that the launch of the *TGCFS* project in 2000 was the local producers' attempt to innovate the programming of the conventional travel documentary in response to the unfavourable documentary production environment in the late 1990s. Both "life experience"-based *Airwave Boys* and gamedoc *Survivor* provided a new direction for the local programme makers to enhance GDTV's market competitiveness in the local tough television market and make contributions to enrich the televisual presentation of the non-fiction genre on domestic television screens.

The pioneering spirit of the GDTV programme maker encouraged them to overcome the obstacles of their production environment and to take on the risks of a test market. Instead of struggling to achieve the same high production standard as the Western

³¹ The foregrounding of emotional appeal in the production of the *TGCFS* is discussed in Chapter Six.

Survivor, the local programme makers focused on finding the best subject matter to lead (and chase) the emerging audience both in local and domestic markets. By examining GDTV programme makers concerns and decision making in the process of localizing two foreign popular reality formats, this research found that the directors of the *TGCFs* were aware that television as a popular culture form is closely attached to Chinese mainstream social ideologies, including officially approved cultural traditions, ethical values and aesthetic criteria.

In the six years of its production history, GDTV programme makers continued to make efforts to maintain their vigour in the front line of new television programming by hybridizing overseas popular reality formats and developing original ideas. Interestingly, the format of the *TGCFs* became similar to the *Survivor* format. Nevertheless, its audience ratings and popularity decreased. The reasons behind this phenomenon (e.g. the conflict with generic assumptions, the contradictions of its cultural context, a lack of audience response, the influence of the institutional environment) are analyzed in detail and in depth in the following chapters (from Chapter Six to Eleven). Many issues raised and points addressed in relation to the key argument of the thesis in this chapter are revisited and discussed further below.

Chapter Six: Documentary Approach and Dramatic Effects

The boom of outdoor survival format of programmes on domestic television screens (including *TGCFS*, *Survivor* and other local followers¹) in the beginning of this century opened a new field of televisual presentation to the Chinese people. This new breed of hybrid programmes challenged media professionals, scholars and viewers' established generic assumptions and generated confusion in established patterns.

Outdoor survival format programmes can be argued to be a mixture of elements of documentary, game show and television drama essentially made for entertaining the audience rather than having some serious undertaking in constructing socio-political discourses². Nevertheless, these local productions as with their Western counterparts often attempted to exploit some kind of kinship with the traditional documentary genre in order to appeal to the viewer. In this studied Chinese pioneer reality production, the impact of the conventional documentary genre on the reality programming and production was explicit. As mentioned in Chapter Five, the *TGCFS* crew was made up of a group of experienced "special topic" programme makers. In the process of the *TGCFS* format making, GDTV's travel documentary tradition experienced a series of transformation from informative approach to infotainment orientation. However, local programme makers' ambiguous recognition of the nature of the reality format provoked a set of debates among the crew members on the production approach to the recording and presentation of "real life" experience.

This chapter focuses on examining the production agenda of the pioneer reality programme in the context of a generic approach. The inaugural season, *Tracing China Overland Border* (GDTV, 2000) is taken as the major example to explore the impact

¹ *Airway Boys* broadcast in Hong Kong, therefore its influence was limited to the Pearl River Delta (PRD) area where people can receive free-on-air signals from Hong Kong television.

² The second season, *Retracing the Long March* made an interesting example in regard to the issue of presenting political discourse for the Party. The dynamics of entertainment function and political purpose are analyzed in Chapter Seven.

of the conventional documentary genre on reality format making from the perception of the programme makers. The creation of a Chinese version of *Airwave Boys* in 2000 was an exploratory enterprise by the production team and thereby it involved negotiation, argument and compromise. This chapter highlights their major considerations in transforming the production approach from documentary to drama, and addresses their struggles for being real and being dramatic in the production of a ratings-driven reality format. Based on the discussion of the original production approach, the chapter also articulates the changes in production conception and approach taking place over the six years of its history.

6.1 The Documentary Approach

As outlined above, before starting to explore the territory of entertainment-oriented *documentary* hybrid programming, GDTV had established a documentary production culture and won a solid reputation for making travel-based “special topic” series in the domestic television industry. And, as mentioned in Chapter Five, the launch of the inaugural season was attributed to the ambitions of a group of documentary makers in the Social-Education Sector to produce a large-scale travel television programme with a new approach, one that could effectively attract audiences’ viewing interest. In the later 1990s, *Airwave Boys* (NTV, 1998) as a prototype reality programme, appealed to Guangdong programme makers as well as audiences in the PRD area for its dramatic “narrative”, in terms of featuring ordinary people’s first-hand encounters with the local culture during their journeys through exotic locations.

Inspired by the *Airwave Boys* format, GDTV television makers attempted to hybridize conventional travel programming to enhance its entertainment value by adding new elements to enhance audience appeal; such as the exotic scenery along China’s overland border, a gender mix of contestants for potential love affairs and the suspense of whether ¥ 4000 (about US\$ 500) was enough for people to travel around the country for six months. By adopting observational documentary techniques and

planting multiple storylines into the conventional travel programming, the crew was anxious to make a local version that could create more interesting real life stories than the *Airwave Boys*.

Haralovich & Trosset (2004) asserts that “the power and popularity of reality programming depends on the authenticity of the contrived reality” (p.79). Watching “real” people’s “real” life story on television has been an appeal of reality programming for many viewers. Hill’s (2002) studies on Western audience’s viewing practice of *Big Brother* also indicates that “audiences look for the moment of authenticity when real people are ‘really’ themselves in an unreal environment” (p.323).

6.1.1 A Non-Interventionist Approach

This research into a Chinese reality production reveals that the *TGCFs* programme makers were aware that authenticity is an important feature that could allow a reality programme to compete for audiences with scripted and performed television dramas in China. Influenced by *Airwave Boys*’ non-interventionist approach to the subject, a non-invasive record of real life experience was originally established to be a guideline for filming and promoted to invite viewers to have a documentary engagement with the programme.

Similar to the original *Airway Boys*, the *TGCFs* crew also adopted documentary techniques, such as an observational camera³, and synchronous sound in order to provide audience an impression of witnessing “‘the real’ unfold by giving an impression that what is happening on the screen is right there with them” (Vrooman, 2003, p.217). The documentary codes and conventions applied to this reality production were to encourage local audiences to view the hybrid format by adopting a “documentary mode of engagement” with the text (Nichols, 1991, p.25). In this local

³ The technique of hidden camera was adopted in the first season. This point is discussed later in this chapter.

production, an observational mode was adopted in the filming stage and an expositional documentary mode in post-production.

The popularity of the amateur-look *Airwave Boys* in Guangdong province in 1998 had informed GDTV makers that Chinese viewers would not mind that if a programme looks crude in terms of the quality of the image and editing, as long as the two young men's adventure seemed authentic and touching on the screen. In order to achieve the *Airwave Boys*-like documentary look, the *TGCFS* team exercised an observational approach to the filming, in terms of following the participants, catching the real action and of course selecting the most interesting aspects of their daily routine. The observational mode has been widely adopted in various reality forms, which "often seems more 'truthful' than other modes" (Roscoe & Hight, 2001, p.19), because this mode "stresses the nonintervention of the filmmaker" (p.38) and "emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera" (Nichols, 1991, p.34).

Influenced by *Airwave Boys'* non-interventionist approach to the subject, the crew initially attempted to "empower" three participants to make their own decisions on how to carry out the survival challenge. Director Hui Han claims in an interview with *South China Television Journal*⁴ that

Our initial design of the first season was to document the real life experience and allow participants to have considerable self-determination. We only set up the starting point, finishing point, travel route and duration. Thus the directors did not have a clear idea how much 'drama' and whether there would be 'drama' on their way (Guo, 2001, p.30).

Han cites one of the major problems the crew encountered when they first worked on a travel documentary project. The filming was not based on natural and cultural

⁴ Shortly after the completion of the inaugural season, five key members of the production team, including director Kangsui Fan, director Hui Han, director Hong Huang, and director Gaolin Zhang, were interviewed by a scholarly television journal, *South China Television Journal*.

content, but was on the daily routine of the three ordinary people who were neither trained performers, nor led by a travel guide or expert who could provide rich information about tourism or outdoor adventures. What the crew in fact was dealing with was a group of participants (except for Dao Lü who was in fact a member of the crew⁵) who not only attempted to hide from camera, but also intended to escape from any hardship⁶. It can be seen that in the early 2000s these Chinese reality programme makers were not very sophisticated in their reality programme making. Instead, their original interpretation of the *Airway Boys*-style format was strongly influenced by the discourse of conventional documentary.

6.1.2 The Presence of a Camera

In the inaugural season, the production team was devoted to enhancing the televisual quality by deploying updated filming and recording equipment during filming. Moreover, the crew also used a hidden camera to capture real moments with a non-invasive gesture. In the Western examples of *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, the round-the-clock surveillance “provides a certain guarantee of authenticity” (Andrejevic, 2004, p.107). A fly-on-the-wall camera style and confessional mode of interviews position their viewers into an omniscient status. However, due to the sensibility of ethics⁷ and the restrictions on the production techniques, the film crew’s exploitation of observational techniques was limited in the use of a hidden camera. However, the use of the hidden camera was limited to the day time. As Production consultant Hong Xi comments,

The producer cannot intervene in the private lives of the contestant by setting up surveillance cameras in their bedrooms, because this is

⁵ The fact that Dao Lü conspired with the filming crew to create some interesting stories by giving a performance to the camera is discussed later in this Chapter.

⁶ These points are further discussed in this chapter as well as spreading into the arguments across various chapters.

⁷ This point is discussed in section 5.3.2 “Ethical Considerations of Privacy”. Another example relates to this issue was the banning of the Chinese imitation of *Big Brother*. This case also indicates the risks of taking a surveillance gesture in reality programme making.

inconsistent with Chinese ethics (personal communication, November 19, 2006).

The local team had to mainly rely on observational filming techniques to follow the participants in carrying out their journey and capturing any details. Observational programme making aims to convey the idea that the programme production has made an “attempt to minimize its influence on events, to set nothing up” (Dovey, 2000, p.139). However, on closer inspection, the application of observational techniques in this local production in fact reflected the programme maker’s great interference in the real life experience that occurred in front of the camera.

As a group of working photos show in Figure 14, it was common for the filming crew to shoot participants from a close distance and positioned in a place where the participants would unlikely ignore the camera. Such a kind of approach was nothing like fly-on-the-wall encounters, but was aimed mainly to capture a moment with the best camera angle. Director Gao argued

The presence of the camera more or less retrained their expression. I believe that the participants may not always want to hide something. It was likely that they did not feel comfortable with the camera (personal communication, July 21 2006).

These working photos illustrate that the crew positioned ordinary participants as a semi-performer who often would unconsciously perform a “mediated self” to the camera in order to maintain a good public image or would hide their real nature and thoughts in order to minimize their exposure.



1 Recording participants' story in the Silk Road in the 4th season



2 An one-on-one interview with a participant carried out in private in the 4th season



3 Capturing an emotional scene in the 4th season



3 A staged scene of teammates holding hands and marching across the Great Grassland in the 2nd season



4 Recording participate communicating with local people in the 3rd season people



5 Recording Monks' encountering local in *Go to the West*

Figure 14 Some working photos

Moreover, following and shooting the participants walking on the street with a sizable DV camera and micro phone also significantly affected the behaviour of the ordinary people who the participants encountered during their journey. As participant Yin Wang of the first season claims, “the existence of the camera sometimes affected our normal communication with local people” (personal communication, September 1, 2003). According to her description, people who saw the camera either welcomed them or fled. The former often provided the same help they would usually offer to an outsider, perhaps because they would like to look good on television. The latter simply walked away. Neither situation would be the same as if the camera crew were not there. Director Linggao Chen argues in an interview shortly after the filming

The most needed filming equipments are hidden cameras which can make the object and thereby to record more authentic images (Guo, 2001, p.30)

Despite the virtue of using a hidden camera, the synch sound of the first season was poorly recorded due to the low quality of the portable DV camcorder they were equipped with in 2000. Hong Huang explains that

Because we have to guarantee the quality of the image. In the latter filming we used more updated equipment. The visual quality of the small size camera was unsatisfactory (personal communication, June 16, 2006).

In the series, the hidden camera caught a scene in which participant Dao Lü was having a serious argument with the safe guide in front of a shopping mall when he was trying to sell his camera there. Cameramen used long-distance filming techniques to observe the incident without being noticed by the safe guide or the passersby. This kind of dramatic scene was heavily demanded of the filming crew. It possibly would not be the same story if the people involved were aware of being filmed. However, the inaugural season was the only season which involved a hidden camera. Since 2001, GDTV banned the use of the hidden camera, because it produced a low gauge image. In order to guarantee the broadcasting quality of the images, the crew had to rely on a

larger size DV camera and microphone for the production (see Figure 14). Editor Fang Hui argues that “if you used a big microphone, it was like making a television drama, no longer like a documentary. There was a contradiction here” (personal communication, July 21 2006). In many cases, the crew members were aware of the obstacles that affect to their non-interventionist approach to the subject. However, in the production history, they often struggled to conquer their barriers to unite all crew member’s production conceptions or to break through their limitations in production techniques.

6.1.3 An Expository Mode of Televisual Presentation

In the post-production stage, the televisual presentation of the series had to follow the tradition of “special topic” programming. Editors had to rely on voice over to help the story telling. This was partly attributed to the limited time frame (about two weeks) that were left over for editing, but also largely resulted from the fact that the raw footage often lacked dramatic tension and the interviews were short of valuable information. Therefore, editor Hui Fang had to use a voice over to make the narrative seem more interesting. However, this kind of approach in fact breached the original guidelines for the filming in terms of inviting viewers to have a direct engagement with the televisual text. Instead, it pronounced the invasion of the programme maker by integrating “intimate and explicitly subjective forms of knowledge” into the narrative of the reality programme (Hight, 2001, p.394).

The “real life” stories in the inaugural season was based on editor Hui Fang’s version of the story, because he wrote the script according to his interpretation of the real-life stories from the hours of raw material and often a brief communication with the on-the-spot director through a phone call. In this studied case, the narrator’s personal encounter on the scene also contributed to the construction of the “real life” experience. An informal and emotional approach to the voice over challenged audience’s generic assumptions and generated great debate between the

post-production team and the on-the-spot filming team. Such a kind of approach directly signalled to the viewer that a manipulation and distortion of the “real life” experience had been pursued in the process of making the programme⁸.

In the later seasons, such as the second season, with an increase in both the number of participants (from the original three to twenty participants) and the length of each episode (from about ten to twenty-five minutes), insufficient camera angles (with five cameras working in the field⁹) and inadequate interview materials (mainly resulting from participants’ conservative expression¹⁰) also made it difficult for the editor to process an observational mode of televisual construction. Facing this situation, voice over was again continuously treated as an important strategy in assisting the story telling and enhancing the entertainment value of the televisual presentation. The observational mode of documentary approach gradually became a strategy to help creating a “real” effect rather than presenting the real.

6.1.4 Communication between the Director and Editor

The other important aspect affecting the crew’s authentic approach to the subject is the communication between the filming crew and the post-production team. In order to convey a feeling of immediacy, the *TGCFS* crew attempted to parallel the process of filming and screening. The broadcasting of the first run was minimized to about two weeks behind the filming. Such an arrangement generated many debates on televisual presentation of the real-life stories between the filming crew and post-production team (mainly between the Chief Director and the Editor¹¹).

⁸ This unique approach is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

⁹ In most of the seasons, the filming crew mainly had three DV cameras allocated for three sub teams (each team consisting of a director, a cameramen and a technician). When the crew decided to apply a *Survivor*-style competition in the second season, this included a dramatic increase in the number of participants from three to twenty. Since the production is a travel-based production, it was very difficult for the filming crew to rely on five cameras to achieve a comprehensive observation of 20 participants during their travelling.

¹⁰ This unique pattern and its impact on this local reality production are assessed in Chapter Seven.

¹¹ The so-called editors in this local production managed the post-production independently and often reported directly to the Production Supervisor to finalize the broadcast version of the *TGCFS* series. The on-the-spot

Throughout the production history, the team had been struggling to achieve effective and sufficient communication between directors in the field and editors in the GDTV station. The inconsistency in the concept of editing between the on-the-spot director and the station-based editor had been a long standing problem which was addressed frequently by the interviewees.

The on-the-spot directors often have an overall conception of how the story should be told, from the perspective of a witness. For the cameraman, they would have a preferred choice of particular shots in relation to their approach to the subject and their access to the event as it happened during the competition. However, the editor's access to the truth was mainly through video tapes and the description of the directors. They sometimes did not have a clue about what were the consequences and context of the real events. Director Hong Huang concerns that

Editors did not know the whole process of happening on the spot which was only experienced by on-the-spot directors and cameramen. Therefore, the editors would easily overlook some very important details (personal communication, June 7, 2001).

Based on ineffective verbal communication, it was difficult for the editors to make the best choices of the shots and comments from hundreds of hours of raw footage within very tight working schedule. Programme makers often attributed this problem to the insufficient communication between the two ends which was caused by limited telecommunication technology and/or ineffectual communication methods.

Technically, in the production of the first two seasons, the development of telecommunication technology and service networks in the early 2000s were not as developed and nor available as nowadays. Travelling in a remote and economically relative undeveloped area made it difficult for the filming director and editor to

directors often watched the series after they travelled back to Guangdong. By then the series often had already completed its first run.

achieve sufficient communication during the filming. In practical terms, before the fourth season, communication between the on-the-spot director and station-based editor mainly relied on a long-distance phone call, through which the on-the-spot director explained what had happened there and made some important points in relation to the post-production. However, as Hong Huang points out,

Whether the on-the-spot director and the editor could achieve sufficient communication was one question and whether the on-the-spot director could entirely convey his idea to the editor was another question (personal communication, June 7, 2001).

Generally speaking, there was a lack of scheduled and substantial communication between the on-the-spot director and the editor in the GDTV headquarters. In the production history, in order to achieve an authentic approach to the series, in terms of authentically presenting the on-the-spot director's version of the "real life" stories through the assistance of the editor, the programme makers tried various ways to attempt to achieve a better communication between the filming crew and the post-production team during the production stage. The problems of wasting high-value shots and inaccurately presenting the consequences of events in the finished series emerged in the production of the inaugural season. As Producer Zhiping Zhu said

The editing concept of the on-the-spot director and editor were often mismatched. Based on the personal interpretation of the raw material, the editor would often process a recreation of the content (personal communication, June 5, 2006).

What Zhu refers here to the idea of reconstructing the raw material by the editor who was allowed to have his/her own version of interpretation of the "real life" stories and encouraged to be creative in storytelling.

In the second season, in order to maximally achieve the original idea of the on-the-spot director in constructing the narrative, the production team tried to

accomplish an initial cut on the spot after each daily filming. They took a portable editing device with the filming crew and attempted to complete the first cut on the spot. The director's version with the basic narrative structure then was sent back to the station for a fine cut.

Evidently, local producers made great efforts to maintain the integrity of the real-life stories they captured. However, this method was abandoned shortly after the filming. Apart from the inconvenience caused by a high frequency of setting up and disassembling the editing machine during travelling, an obvious disadvantage to the on-the-spot director as finding that taking on the role of editor during the filming was very distractive. Devoting too much time on editing would affect the daily work of the director in an intense working environment. It was not until the fourth season that Chief Director Hui Han started to write story summaries on a daily basis during the filming. Han would present a storyline according to the three Executive Director's versions, but this storyline was mainly intended to be a reference for an editor rather than something compulsorily required by the editor to follow. Up to this stage, this production of *TGCFS* no longer attempted to achieve a consistency of production conception between the production and the post-production, but focused on the importance of reconstruction (this point is discussed in section 6.5 below)

6.3 Public's Suspicions of Authenticity

Generally speaking, in the early years of the *TGCFS* production, many negotiations of the production methods were rooted in the production crew's attempt to find a better way to present the authentic as well as dramatic real life stories to the viewer. It can be said that apart from the nature of the production model, the restrictions on production techniques and the limitation of production scale were obstacles to entirely achieving their documentary approach to the topic. Adhering to this fact, however, was a major part of the discourse of this reality format production, in particular in the earlier two seasons. Nevertheless, truth is also one of the most vulnerable aspects that

can be sacrificed by the reality programme maker to fulfil their demand for interesting stories. Western criticism of reality programmes being unfaithful to their promise of giving access to the real seems to have a global currency. In this Chinese pioneer reality making, the crew's claim for presenting an unscripted and unrehearsed production was doubted by public commentators and viewers. Director Hong Huang recalls the public response to the series in the earlier seasons that

Some most frequently asked questions by the audience include whether what was shown in the programme is real and whether the contestants camped outdoor everyday. Due to the uniqueness of the outdoor survival challenge, many audiences suspected its authenticity (personal communication, June 19, 2006).

Those audience responses were gathered from the crew's direct contacts with their viewing audiences and public commentaries¹². The Chinese audience's suspicion of the truthfulness of this televisual event could also be perceived in the studio discussion of the inaugural season of *TGCFs* in CCTV's talk show, *Tell it Like it is* in early 2001. The topic of the discussion was titled "Survival experience under the camera observation" (*Jingtou xia de shengcun tiyan*) which clearly reflected the talk show producer's intention to set up a public debate about the authenticity of the three participants experience on a television production.

6.4 Generic Confusion

When the CCTV Host Yongyuan Cui labelled the *TGCFs* series as a "real people show"¹³ (equivalent to the Western term of "reality show") in the studio discussion, this kind of classification of the programme immediately raised debates among GDTV professionals. Initially, this newly emerged Western-imported term was not

¹² The crew members' access to the audience reception was not based on professional research of the viewing practices of their actual audience. Throughout the production history, the programme makers' knowledge of their audience was developed through discursive channels, including letters/emails written by audiences, public discussions in the online forum of the show on GDTV's official website and individually-based informal investigation. Some relevant discussion on this aspect is included in the section on "measuring the audience" in Chapter Nine.

¹³ The context of this Chinese label of "Reality TV" is included in Chapter Three.

welcomed by the crew members. As Director Hong Huang recalls,

This was the first time I heard people calling our programme as a ‘show’. I felt quite upset. ‘Show’ gives an impression of artificiality, so I felt quite insulted (personal communication, June 7, 2006).

In the year 2000, with no awareness of the Western concept of “Reality TV”, documentary was the predominant generic assumption which influenced the production approach to the subject. Huang expresses a shared attitude of GDTV programme makers. The conception of “show” in Chinese people’s mind is associated with ideas of performance, artificiality and amusement. As Production Supervisor, Xüyang Sun comments on his first encounter with the term of “real people show”,

Primarily, I did not accept the idea of a ‘real people show’. I identified our programme as a type of factual-based television or called it life experience format programme. If the programme was a (reality) show, the production would contain more staged practices. If the programme was about spontaneous happenings, then the situation was unforeseeable, because you could not script it in advance (December 9, 2006).

As mentioned in Chapter Five, programmes like *Airwave Boy* were regarded as a type of life experience format which were often categorized into the non-fiction genre. Non-scripted, non-rehearsed and non-directed were treated as important criteria to strengthen the *TGCFS* format’s kinship to the documentary genre and to distinguish their production from those highly constructive variety shows, game shows and quiz shows that Chinese media scholars later attempted to group together¹⁴. Although in the early stage of the *TGCFS* format making, crew members’ understanding of the new hybrid programming was not totally unified, crew members generally believed that they had authentically recorded and presented the life experience of the three participants on television. Sun argues that

A show must involve lots of staging. In the primary stage of our production, we did not have this kind of intention. We simply wanted to

¹⁴ The discussion of Reality TV being widely viewed as the fourth stage of the development of Chinese entertainment programmes is included in Chapter Three.

generate some stories by setting up a big framework, such as the travel budget and three people's relationships. The stories would come out during their long journey.

After viewing CCTV's talk show *Tell it Like it is* about the inaugural season of *TGCFs*, CCTV's production team and the leaders of the GDTV had a meeting to discuss the issue of defining their programme as a "real people show". After a series of negotiations, the crew members eventually reached a consensus on accepting the need for this change. As director Hong Huang recalls,

During the meeting, leaders [of the television station] and our team members eventually took on the idea of labelling our programme a 'real people show'. Based on this consideration, we re-examined our production and realized that we did not have enough elements of a 'show' (personal communication, June 6, 2006)

The outcome of this meeting was evidence of GDTV operators and non-fiction programme makers having initiated a commercial consciousness in making a ratings friendly programme. However, this research found that at that time, the crew's conception of "show" was mainly associated with the idea of making their programme more entertaining and enjoyable to watch, but was not immediately equivalent to the idea of being fake. Although there was acknowledgement of *TGCFs* as a reality show, their changing attitudes towards the "real person show" had a fundamental influence on the development of the *TGCFs* format. The production approach to the localization of a global format started to shift from focusing on conventional documentary techniques to incorporating more elements popularized by reality programming.

Interviews with television makers, participants and journalists all suggest that labelling the *TGCFs* series as "real people show" has been taken for granted as applicable to the series and to many other examples of the new breed of hybrid programmes featuring ordinary people. These interviewed reality programme makers

were not necessarily capable of articulating the nuances of the terms (e.g. documentary, “special topic” programme, and Reality TV) that they frequently addressed through daily talks in the working environment and through public commentaries in the mainstream media.

With the introduction of *Survivor* elements into the local production since its second season, the *TGCFS* series gradually transformed from a life experience format to an entertainment-oriented and commercially-driven gamedoc format¹⁵. Consequently, producers became more aware of the differences between a reality format production and conventional documentary production. Director Jie Wu¹⁶ argues that

Reality TV is absolutely different from documentary, because Reality TV programme makers must intervene in the subject. Designing game rules was a type of intervention. Moreover, the intervention is contrived and must proceed for the particular purpose of the programme maker (July 25, 2006).

Wu’s comment is an interpretation of “a piece of made-for-TV entertainment” (Kilborn, 2003, p.24) from the programme maker’s perspective. Although the *TGCFS* team had an intention to authentically record the media event, they encountered various difficulties in carrying out their initial documentary approach to the subject in the television production environment. There are two major issues which emerged in their production history that had an impact on their production approach to the subject and which generated great debates among production team members. One is the intervention of the producer in the filming stage and the other is the reconstruction of the raw footage in the post-production period.

6.5 The Act of Intervention

¹⁵ The context of this transformation of the format is provided through the examination of the different aspects of the production agenda.

¹⁶ Mr. Jie Wu involved in the *TGCFS* production from its second season, and was one of the production managers during that season.

Kilborn (2003) argues that “all documentary work is to a greater or lesser extent the result of some act of intervention” (p.155). However, the act of intervention in reality programme and conventional documentary making often involves a different context. Documentary makers’ acts of intervention are often for the purpose of access to reality rather than shaping of the “real world”. This reality production indicates that the *TGCFS* makers gradually drifted away from documentary practice with the deepening of their understanding of the nature of reality production. The *TGCFS* series fundamentally is a mass produced media product for the television schedule and made to serve the assumed audience's desire for voyeuristic pleasure, as both Western and Chinese media scholars have argued (Kilborn, 2003, Mapplebeck, 2002, Cummings, 2002, Yin, 2006 *et al.*).

During the filming of *TGCFS*, crew members were puzzled by the question of how to strategically intervene in a participant’s survival experience and to what degree they were allowed to do so without affecting the authenticity of the real life experience and/or the authentic look of the series. Dating back to the inaugural season when GDTV programme makers first started their exploratory practice of making a popular reality programme, the hybrid nature of the *TGCFS* format generated debate on the production approach among the team members whose generic assumptions of documentary were central to their arguments. One strand of the team's understanding of the *TGCFS* genre was primarily associated with conventional documentary. These crew members insisted in capturing and presenting what happened naturally and originally in front of the camera. The other strand of generic assumptions involved crossing the boundaries of non-fiction and fiction genres. Crew members belonging to this strand preferred to adopt a flexible approach to the recording and presentation of real life experience.

A certain degree of staging was considered as being necessary in an entertainment-oriented programming and valuable to enhance the quality of the production. The result of the confrontation of the two strands was, as the Production

Supervisor Xüyang Sun revealed,

With the constantly struggle for dramatic stories during months of production on the spots, consequently, the crew members all realized that a completely non-interruption of the participant survival experience and a lack of design in the plot would only result in a boring programme (personal communication, December 11, 2006).

The production team found that their commitment to minimize their intrusion into the contrived “real-life” scenarios did not brought the persistent dramatic appeal that they expected. The participant’s “uncooperative” attitude towards being filmed and exposing their privacy to the public, in particular in the earlier seasons, created obstacles for the filming crew to catch the valuable images they anticipated.

A non-interventionist approach caused some crises for the producer to manage during the filming. For instance, participant Jun Zhang was an experienced outdoor sport player highly interested in exploring some remote areas which provided great spectacle, but poor transportation; whereas, the filming crew had to consider issues of safety, budget control and available technical backup. In this kind of situation, the director had to decline the participant’s request. The director’s interference thereby caused conflict between the filming crew and participants which affected the participant’s enthusiasm for carrying out the survival challenge to the end.

Shortly after the completion of the filming, five key members of the production crew were interviewed by *South China Television Journal*¹⁷, Director Suikang Fan reflected on the problem of the original non-interventionist approach to their subject. He argues that

Looking back the initial plan, I think that positioning the challenger in a situation of self determination made the filming crew become a passive recorder and allowed the challenger to evade hardship. If the activity involved more compulsory, compelled challenge tasks, they had no way to

¹⁷ This is one of the major scholarly television journals in China. Its main focus was television in the South of China.

evade. Probably, the programme could show more content that the audience expected” (Guo, 2001, p.28).

This comment directly addresses the issue of the necessity of the programme maker taking control of the filming to a certain extent. Learning from their experience, the crew modified their conception in the second season and the control of situations in the field was given back to the on-the-spot director. The *Survivor*-like competition was set up to enhance dramatic tension by providing more interesting content and complicating the interpersonal relationships among the participants. The compulsory game tasks given along the journey also reduced the possibility of participants’ evasion of any hardship.

6.6 Reconstruction

By examining the entire production procedure, it is obvious that post-production is the stage where openly applied dramatic devices are used to construct the story and directly shape the audience's viewing experience. Director Huang Hong argues that

The truth was filtered firstly from the communication between the on-the-spot director and editor and then from the first cut to the final version. Lack of sufficient communication was the essential/fundamental problem (personal communication, June 7, 2006).

The research found that opinions among the programme makers were contradictory in response to the concern of whether the ideas of the on-the-spot directors on how to construct the stories needed to be combined with those of the post-production directors and editors.

Direct Tao Lin also argues that “the first-hand experience of the on-the-spot director, to some extent, would narrow their field of vision” (personal communication, June 5, 2006). In another words, without the predominated experience and knowledge about what had happen in the real circumstances, the station-based editor would have no framework to restrict their imagination and creativity for structuring the raw footage

to complete their story telling.

A similar point of view was given by the Production Supervisor Xuyang Sun. He claimed that

The post-production director and editor do not necessarily need to listen to the ideas of the on-the-spot director. Instead, the construction of the narrative should rely more on their creativity and imagination to accomplish. The finished series was the secondary creation by the editors who structure the raw material and process the content according to their own interpretation (personal communication, December 11, 2006).

Based on Sun's concept, in the fourth season, the team adopted a specific working method. Based on the "1+2+3" competition model, the filming crew was divided into three sub-teams. Each team was made up of an executive director, cameraman and camera assistant to follow one strand of contestant(s). After the daily filming, the executive director was required to write down a detailed description of the stories that happened on the day and then hand these to the Chief Director. Based on the three sets of individual paperwork, the Chief Director Hui Han would highlight the best parts and then develop these into a story outline for the editor to use as a reference. But how to use this "writing report" was up to the post-production team. This method seemed to work effectively in the production of the fourth season. It not only minimized the waste of valuable audio-visual materials, but also allowed creative space for the post-production director in their work.

6.6.1 Presenting Emotional Truth

Generally speaking, the Chinese participants in the production of *TGCFS* were not very cooperative in expressing themselves in front of the camera as compared to their Western counterparts in *Survivor* (This issue is explained in Chapter Seven). The *TGCFS* producer chose an alternative way to explore the emotional truth of participants. Inspired by *Airway Boys* in which the producer requested two young men

to keep a diary (see Figure 8 in Chapter Five) and recited their personal reflections on their experience through a female voice over, the director of *TGCFS* utilized a similar way of exploring the participant's authentic feelings. The filming crew asked some participants to keep a diary on the journey to present on television. In order to visualize their feelings on screen, producers used the strategy of staging to represent their thoughts and moods. Post-production Director Hui Fang asserts that

It was difficult to present on the screen. Therefore, staging was needed. I think this kind of staging was not against the principle of authenticity. It was representing the reality [...]. The content was real, in terms of writing by the participant. Some staged sequences were designed as he/she was writing diary and then the producer would ask the participant to recite and record it. This kind of combination looks real and good on the screen. This kind of design did not break the promise of reality (personal communication, July 21 2006).

This kind of sequence was often constructed as an individual contestant's self-confession in the *TGCFS* series. Video camera' gestures were presented as taking a peek at his/her writing diary in private. Editing techniques were then employed to combine the image with sound (the participant's reciting or a female voice over) and emotional background music to convey a feeling of "self-confession". Hui Fang considers that

It is permissible to use televisual means to represent mental activities. Based on the principle of not running counter to the truth, we can utilize rhetoric and poetic television language, such as emotional background music, close ups and montage to convey a more accurate feeling of the participants at the moment to the viewer (personal communication, July 21 2006).

His comments indicate that conventional documentary assumption still strongly influenced the construction of the televisual presentation of the participant's voiced feelings. Taking a dramatic approach in this case was not necessary to mislead the audience away from the truth. However, whether it is necessary to sacrifice the authenticity of the "survival challenge" experience conventions generated many

debates among the local producers. Post-production Director Hui Fang believes that there are bottom lines in the construction of the emotional truth. He argues that

To authentically record what happened sometime seems to lack a plot and thereby is not enjoyable to watch. In order to make it interesting to watch, the programme maker needs to add in some design. However, in my opinion, the design should not affect the three participants' travel routine (personal communication, July 21, 2006).

Fang's opinion was not popular when the filming team faced a struggle to provide interesting content for the series. As a television production made for chasing a tight television schedule, shortly after the beginning of the filming in the inaugural season authenticity became one of the looser aspects of the non-fiction programming for programme makers and audience to debate and speculate upon.

6.6.2 Innovating the Voice Over

What the editor contributed to the “reality” was more than Nichols (1991) has argued; that editing “serves mainly to sustain the spatial and temporal continuity of observation rather than the logical continuity of an argument or case” (p.40). In the inaugural series, the unique style of voiceover was highlighted by later public commentary. As the narrator Liang Xū¹⁸ self assessed, “the success of the first season, to some extent, also attributed to the voice over” (personal communication, August 1, 2006). Liang Xū is a locally known radio anchor who specialized in entertainment programmes. As mentioned earlier this chapter, when she was invited by editor Hui Fang to give the voice over for the *TGCFs* series, her non-official broadcasting manner and emotional approach was not immediately approved by the filming crew and by officials at GDTV.

During voice dubbing, Liang Xū often did not strictly follow the given script written

¹⁸ Mrs. Liang Xū acted as the narrator in the first season and became the host in the fourth season.

by editor Hui Fang. She liked to comment on the situation in an impromptu way and express her emotional engagement with the scene in a straightforward manner. She often criticizes participants' various faults captured by the camera and editorialised participant's potential thoughts. In this case, Liang Xü as a narrator contributed to the construction of the "real life" experience through her personal perspectives on scenes. The initial debate between the filming crew and the post-production team centred on the issue of whether the new style of narration was debasing the value of their "documentary" production¹⁹, because her tabloid-style narration was highly subjective and very entertainment-oriented, which contrasted with the "Voice-of-God" commentary according to expositional documentary tradition. Moreover, her critical approach to the subject also clashed with a shared expectation of portraying everyday heroes through their outdoor adventures (the cultural context of outdoor sports is mentioned in Chapter Five and further discussed in Chapter Seven). However, after struggling for ten episodes, her innovative approach to the voice over was no longer a concern of the programme makers due to its capability for raising public curiosity.

This example indicates the foregrounding of audience interest in the reality production. To a large extent, the sense of access to the realness in a reality programme attributable to a programme maker's ability to effectively deliver to the viewer a sense of encountering the real, rather than the degree of actuality achieved in the televisual presentation. Narrator Liang Xü argues that

To convey a sense of the authenticity was more important than authentically present the real, because even when you present the original happenings, the audience may not find them enjoyable to watch. Television programmes have to cater to the market and suit its programme orientation (personal communication, August 1, 2006).

In Liang Xü's case it was her informal style of voice over which created a sense of intimacy for the viewer. Her conversational manner allowed her way of storytelling to

¹⁹ As argued earlier in this chapter, in 2000, the concept of "Reality TV" was not acknowledged by television professionals and audience members/participants. Therefore, documentary assumption are what Chinese people applied to this kind of newly emerged factual programming.

easily resonate with the viewer²⁰.

Xū's point of view was largely shared by the interviewed crew members who had become increasingly sophisticated about the nature of reality programme making. In the later seasons, the utilization of documentary codes and convention not only contributed to the recording of reality, but also had a different set of aesthetic objectives compared with conventional documentary. In contrast to a purpose of accessing reality with little invasion by the documentary makers in the conventional manner, the use of observational techniques played in many reality programme can be argued as delivering voyeuristic pleasure, generating emotional intimacy and creating a media spectacle.

6.7 The Application of Dramatic Devices

Kilborn (2003) addresses a gradually pronounced trend in factual television programming since the 1990s by arguing that

To an increasing extent 'reality' became something that needed to be formatted according to television's designs and specifications. Television's intervention in – and shaping of – the 'real world' became the norm rather than the exception; indeed one of television's promises to its viewers was its ability to mould and manipulate the world of actuality to its own designs. Even the terms 'real' and 'the real world' began to acquire additional connotations, as factual TV producers rushed to cash in on the public appetite for reality (p.74).

Such trends seemed to be highly condensed in the local production throughout its six years of history, because *TGCF*S was aimed to compete for audiences with drama. Chinese media scholar Yungeng Xie (2003) reminds local reality programme makers that

²⁰ It is worth noting that when the subject of the survival challenge changed to a re-enacting of the Long March in the second season, her style was not appropriate to a subject with a political context.

We are facing audiences nurtured by television drama in the past two decades. We should consider their needs and produce ‘reality shows’ that cater to Chinese audience’ viewing habits and aesthetics (Xie, p.76).

This research indicates that local producers were aware that Chinese audiences are significant consumers of narrative media products. Production supervisor, Xüyang Sun argues that

Television after all is about story-telling. A good story brings the audience [...]. Beautiful scenery can only attract an audience for one or two minutes. If there is no story, the audience would have no emotional engagement with the content. Therefore, they would have no desire to continue to watch the programme (December 11, 2006).

His understanding of the importance of *story* in a television production echoes the changing role of television media from a platform for propaganda, news and information to a popular source of family entertainment. Among the six major established television genres in China, including drama, news, documentary, variety show, film and sports, “television drama rates was second only to news in overall popularity” (Yin 2002, p.39) and maintained a leading position in consumption occupying more than one third of China’s television market share (*Chinese Journalism Research*, 2005).

In the *TGCFs* production history, there was an increase in the length of episodes from a average 10 minute in the inaugural season to 43 minutes in the fifth season (see Appendix 4). The series was also changed from a segment of a magazine programme in the first season to an independent production in the second season (see Appendix 1), indicating that the producer intended to develop the series into the standard of television drama which would allow more space to construct real life stories and thereby provide audiences with an impression of watching a “real life” soap. In order to enhance the dramatic effect of the televisual presentation, a set of dramatic devices were borrowed from fictional genres in this studied reality production, including

inciting emotions, portraying love stories, suspension, planting, processing performance, and creating plots.

6.7.1 Emotional Appeal

An important pattern shared with television drama is the foregrounding of emotional appeal. Human emotions and interpersonal interactions are what the local crew was most interested in exploring during the filming and were heavily emphasized in post-production²¹. An emotional approach was an important narrative strategy of drama that had a strong impact on the production approach of the series. Producer Xiaoming Li argues that

I think no matter if it is television drama or documentary, the key is to capture the ‘affections’, including friendship, love, kinship and other human relationships [...]. People who like watching television drama would be attracted by the emotions of the characters, conflict and their fates (November 30, 2006).

Li’s comments clearly suggested that what Western critique of reality programmes’ “‘melodramatic’ tendencies” and “sensationalizing real-life stories for the purposes of entertainment” (Hill, 2000, p.140) was what the local producer was taking for granted in their non-fiction programme making.

The portrayal of emotional highs and lows had to rely on editing techniques and televisual language which often “are achieved through the use of dramatic techniques such as close up, fast paced editing, slow motion, voice over, techniques often associated with television drama” (Corner, 1995, cited in Hill, 2000, p.133). For instance, emotional background music, slow motion cinematography, and close ups of people bursting into tears, were often used to build an emotional climax in the

²¹ The discussion of an emotional approach is also included in Chapter Eight which draws on an example of the melodramatic approach adopted in the second season for the propose of manipulating audience’s emotional engagement with a highly constructed scene about the “real life” survival challenge.

composition of a scene when contestants demonstrated some kind of heroic spirit or encountered some touching moments. Those techniques were particularly used to enhance viewers' emotional engagement with the dramatic scenarios of the contestants' victory, failure and frustration²².

In the Chinese case, to make contestants suffer was regarded as an emotional resource. *Airwave Boys* presents two young men's confrontation with physical adversity which inspired the GDTV makers. The local team believed that the hardship endured by the participants during the physically demanding and mentally intense contest-based survival challenge could effectively incite emotional climaxes. As Director Han Hui argues,

We are not drama directors and challengers are not actors. The only way for us to stimulate their emotional exposure is to break down their willpower through hardship. There was no other way (personal communication, August 14, 2006).

To push ordinary people to their limits both physically and mentally shared a similarity with both *Airway Boys* and *Survivor*. The *TGCFS* team was committed to exploring and presenting what Dovey refers as an "emotional truth". However, the localized production also had distinctive cultural interests. Editor Liu, Dongxia²³ noted that "Besides capturing ordinary people's emotional breakdown, producers were also very interested in presenting sincere sentiments among the contestants" (Liu personal communication, August 1, 2006) such as friendship and love relationships.

6.7.2 An Exploration of Romance

The crew demonstrated a high interest in stimulating and telling any love stories that emerged in the contrived event. It was considered an important pattern that shares a

²² An example of this kind of televisual presentation is included in Chapter Eight.

²³ She was involved in the post production from the 1st to fourth seasons and directed postproduction since the 3rd season.

similarity with drama. Recruiting good looking bachelors and bachelorettes and having a gender-mix of participants are evidence of the local programme makers' casting for dramatic purpose by encouraging love affairs to emerge during the filming.

GDTV producers adapted the *Airwave Boys* formula by adding a single young female participant (Yin Wang). Besides recording three young people's exotic cultural experience and social encounters, the filming crew were highly interested in presenting the triangular relationship between a girl (Yin Wang) and two men (Jun Zhang and Dao Lü). Despite the fact that Jun and Zhang hid their relationship from the crew²⁴, the *TGCFS* crew made no effort to display their journalistic sensitivity. Although the filming crew could not capture much audio-visual “evidence” to prove their suspicion of the love affair occurring between Wang and Zhang, the assumed romance was highlighted in postproduction through voice over. Moreover, the subtle relationship between Lü and the assumed “couple” was also addressed in the series. This kind of approach evidently encouraged audiences to view the reality programme as a “real life” soap which effectively raised audience’s curiosity.



1 Jun Zhang and Yin Wang in the 1st season



2 Local young man Jo teaching girls survival skills in Saipan in the 3rd season

²⁴ Chapter Seven explains the reason why Jun Zhang and Yin Wang refused to expose their love relationship to the camera. The discussion draws on a shared pattern of many participants in regards to the idea of being on television



3 a graphic of pairs in the contest in the 6th season



4 Sam and MM, one of the most memorable couples of the 4th season

Figure 15 Some images illustrating the producers' interest in romance

It can be argued that casting for dramatic purposes is not part of the agenda of conventional documentary practice. However, in *TGCFS*, it is one of the most explicit pieces of evidence that the Chinese reality producer attempted to manipulate the programming to be able to compete for audiences with drama (see Figure 15). The strategy of casting a single participant for potential love stories was carried out as a tradition in the production of the later seasons, but the way of stimulating any potential affection from the participants varied. For instance, both the fifth and sixth seasons adopted the tactic of grouping participants into gender-mixed pairs during the competition. Even though the third season featured an all-girl team, producers strategically brought male “guests” into the filming to achieve their ultimate goal of stimulating dramatic moments. These kinds of approaches made by during *TGCFS* filming are further strong evidence of the *TGCFS* borrowing dramatic techniques in the production of the programme across the seasons.

6.7.3 Planting Suspense

To embed suspense in the narrative structure is another common storytelling skill which has been widely adopted in reality programming making. To a large extent, the appeal of the format is to watch how the contestants handle unexpectedly difficult

survival circumstances in front of the camera. As Haralovich & Trosset (2004) argue, “the pleasure of ‘what happens next’ is not based on the cleverness of scriptwriters or the narrowly evident skills of the players”, but on “an essential unpredictability woven into the formula” (pp.75-76).

As in the example of the inaugural season of *TGCFs*, its subject is about three ordinary people hitchhiking along the 38,000 kilometre national border with ¥ 4000 (which is about US\$ 500 in 2000) per person for six months. This kind of setup created enough suspense to effectively generate public curiosity and encourage the audience to keep watching the programme.

Producers set the standard as 10 kilometre per yuan according to their estimations. During pre-production, local mainstream newspaper *Guangzhou Daily*²⁵ contributed an article questioning the feasibility of accomplishing such a mission. Director Han Hui mentions that

Guangzhou Daily argued that travelling from Dongxing to Dandong with merely ¥ 4000 is absolutely impossible. This opinion represents a social interest. However, we did not satisfy the public curiosity, but evaded this issue. We wasted a chance that could stimulate public debates (personal communication, August 14, 2006).

The sense of suspense is derived from the uncertainty of the fate of the challenger and the unpredictability of the ultimate outcome which would be “further heightened by the use of various tension-building techniques” (Kilborn, 2003, p.20). In this case, the concept of “¥ 4000 budget travel” was supposed to be a valuable thread of the survival story through the entire series. Nevertheless, the actual filming of this kind of non-scripted programme was far more complicated than the producers imagined.

In the pioneering stage of the reality format making, GDTV producers had not fully recognized the significance of maintaining social curiosity and keeping up the

²⁵ *Guangzhou Daily* is a local mainstream newspaper who reported on *TGCFs* every year.

public's long-term interest in the series. Three months after their departure, three participants run out of money and were wanting to quit the challenge. The team struggled with the idea of whether or not the producer should provide some help for the participants to carry out their journey and whether or not the challenge was needed to be completed successfully by all three participants by the appointed day. The Post-production Director, Fang Hui points out that

There were different opinions in regards to the issue of whether we should intervene the travel routine of three challengers. Some crew members believed that they should not spend over ¥ 4000 once the rules were decided. Other members considered that in order to make the programme interesting to watch, producer should treat the participants well which would make them be willing to collaborate with the filming crew (personal communication, July 21, 2006).

The crew eventually decided to secretly help out the challengers to sort out their financial crisis by offering them job opportunities. In the meantime, they made great efforts to persuade the three participants to keep on their journey to the end. Producer Jian Zhao, responding to a question on why the situation of participants quit the filming and/or failed the challenge was not preferred by the crew, said:

We would be unable to satisfy the audience expectations. Moreover, GDTV would be considered as being incapable of producing the show. The proudest scene and touching moment of *TGCFs* appeared in the finale. All efforts made during the journey foreshadowed the grand finale of the show. If the show ends half way through the production, *TGCFs* would not be worthwhile to talk about [...]. Television making has regard for the integrity of the programme (personal communication, August 9, 2006).

Zhao's comments reveal the very nature of reality television making in the Chinese television station, in terms of satisfying the interests of the audience and meeting the expectations of the station authorities.

It can be argued that the reality programme makers largely work on a basic concept of a media event and follow a "before-during-after structure" (Scannell, 2002, p.272). The way that the local producer handed the production "crises" indicates that they

sacrificed the authenticity of the presentation in order to preserve their anticipated happy ending for all their participants in being successful in this survival challenge. In regard to the necessity of this kind of “creative” intervention, Hui Fang represents a different understanding in regards to the issue of whether the manipulation of production should be detached from the storyline. He argues that

If the objective of the challenge was determined to be that all the participants successfully reach the destination, there would be a price to pay for this kind of setup (personal communication, July 21, 2006).

What Fang refers to here is the authenticity of the televisual content. It was considered by him to be the major attraction of the reality show. The anticipated outcome of the given mission would lead to a change in the role of the participants from challengers to performers.

6.7.4 Conspiracy

It is noticeable that professional actors pretend to be “ordinary” peoples in reality shows, and it was a common strategy for casting directors to find their ideal “participants” and/or solve their problems of casting. The Japanese-made *Denpa Shonen* series, as with many other Japan real life challenge shows made in the 1990s, mainly recruited aspiring comedians and actors²⁶. Both TVB’s *Airway Boys* and the original season of the Chinese pioneer production recruited a participant who had the motivation to conspire with the filming crew. Japanese young man Ido in *Airway Boys* was an unproven actor who was seeking an acting career.

In the localized Chinese production, Dao Lü as one of the participants in the inaugural season of *TGCFs* was in fact a member of the production crew who contributed to the

²⁶ The show’s first hitchhiking comic duo, ‘Saruganseki’ experienced instant success after their penniless adventure across Asia and Europe in 1996. Hong Kong DJ Chui-Yan became the host of *Susunu! Denpa Shonen* and became one of the most successful foreign *tarentos* on Japanese TV. His travel partner Ido performed in many television dramas after this show. Naked comedian Nasubi’s diary about his experience of being locked away from the outside world became a best seller in Japan.

development of the production project and presented himself as a young poet in the series²⁷. Director Han Hui explains the reason why they casted Dao Lü as one of the three participants for its first season:

Lü Dao worked for the television station. His involvement could guarantee that the production crew could have a certain degree of control of a central aspect of the programme making. If the other two contestants quit the challenge, the programme still could be successful as long as Lü Dao made it to the terminal. We were prepared for the worst situation to happen (personal communication, July 25, 2006).

Dao Lü's travel partner Yin Wang comments on Lü's reaction to the camera that

Lü Dao was one mostly aware of the camera and mostly collaborating. Jun Zhang was the opposite way and I am in-between. I was relatively emotional and it depended on the situation (personal communication, September 1, 2006)

Although Dao Lü is not a trained actor, working in the television business made him consciously aware of his responsibility for providing stories for the filming crew. During the journey, Dao Lü often was the one who actively sought out ways of earning money to continue their journey along the overland border when the three participants ran out of money. The other two teammates were too ashamed to peddle goods on the street (see Figure 16). Dao Lü admits that

The directors in the first season did not require me to perform. In this circumstance, it was up to me to think about how to act, in terms of how to make some drama for them (personal communication, August 14, 2006).

His comments suggests that his role was one of conspiring with the production team to provide semi-performances for the show. He also acknowledged that the role of participant in the reality programme is to provide factual entertainment rather than the truth. Interestingly, Dao Lü turned to be an instant celebrity after the first season (see Figure 17) and was invited to publish his travel diary (see Figure 18). These facts

²⁷ Dao Lü's involvement in the filming as a participant was also examined in Chapter Seven from the casting agenda perspective.

suggest to the crew that audiences are not necessarily able to identify which scenes are real and which scenes are fake. Instead, they were more interested in the dramatic aspects of the reality.



Figure 16 Dao Lü becoming a street vendor touting to pedestrians to earn money



Figure 17 Dao Lü as the guest in GDTV's New Year Gala



Figure 18 Dao Lü's published *Survival Dairy* (2001, Guangdong People Publishing House)

Kilborn argues (2003) that “in the last decade of the twentieth century those who participated in TV factual programming regularly acquired this status of semi-professionalised performer, acutely aware of the roles they had been allocated” (p.12). Although Chinese outdoor survival programmes mainly rely on everyday people to provide content, Chinese participants often appear to be more and more camera conscious. In the *TGCFS* series the increasing interaction between the film crew and the participants would enhance the participant's understanding of the needs

of the producer.

Although the inaugural season was the only example that the *TGCFs* crew cast a lay-person as the participant, in the later season, a similar kind of approach was repeatedly adopted and became one of the important strategies for directors to take control over the production. In the fourth season, Chief Director Hui Han exercised control of the filming to an extreme. For the fourth season, *Along the Silk Road*, Han dispatched many “lay-performers” to create “incidents” according to the circumstances on location. Those non-professional actors were real local people who were asked to conspire with the filming crew to cause different kinds of interactions with contestants. During the shooting of the team competition, he gave on-the-spot directives according to the situations for the three filming teams. These local people were arranged to play their own roles or some specific roles to create some obstacles for the game playing and to provide interesting stories for the post-production without being noticed by the contestants.

A detailed script was designed in the preproduction period which created some plots according to available resources (e.g. mainly tourist information) that the producer gathered in preproduction from each location along the Silk Road. This example indicates that the director’s intervention into the participant’s on-media life in front of the camera was no less than a drama producer in the later seasons. Directors intervened in the media activity “from start to finish, fixing everything to suit their own ends” (Peyser, August 2002, p.49). During the filming, Han had to be “very adaptable to any given situation that could be thrown at a production” (Ryan, June, 2003, p.26) rather than working according to the script developed in advance. This kind of production method solved the programme's of lack of drama which emerged in the earlier seasons that adopted a less invasive approach to filming.

6.7.5 The Transience of the Production

In the last decade, the exposure of “behind-the-scene” stories has become commonplace, not only in reality programme making, but also everyday social practice. As with the Western situation, the viewer in China now can also receive information on the show from a range of different media outside the control of the programme maker, including independent websites, tabloid newspapers and magazines, radio and “of course television’s own discourse on the series” (Holmes, 2004, p.121). As Tinchknell & Raghuram (2004) argues, the multiple media exposition has become “the source for the development of different meanings about the programme” (p.261). Therefore, this privileged information frees the viewer from the limitations of the programme’s given text. It is possible for a viewer to have a multidimensional understanding of the programme and its participants which may help the viewer interpret the real and identify the unreal in hybrid forms.

In a growing commercialized production environment, local television makers were forced to quickly adapt to the new climate and become more concerned about the needs of the market. Facing this kind of social climate, representing adventure and competitive events involving ordinary people became insufficient, so the crew had to start treating the programme as if it were a constructed narrative and therefore there is another layer of what “actually” happened behind the scenes.

The foregrounding of behind-the-scenes footage is another important factor contributing to the viewer’s interpretation of the “on-screen” life in documentary hybrids. Like those “added bonus” parts in DVDs, the “behind-the-scenes” or “the-making-of” footage features have become an ingredient in many contemporary reality outputs. A special episode about the making of the series was made for the three hours live broadcast of the grand finale²⁸ which not only satisfied viewers’ curiosity, but also showed the filming process of the programme, and thus added more

²⁸ An introduction to the grand finale in the first season is in Chapter Five.

layers to the programme's narrative.

In the earlier stages of the *TGCFS* making, programme makers did not realize the potential for exposing this kind of behind-the-scene stories to the viewer to add more layers to their construction of reality; instead, they hid the truth from the audience. The programme makers in fact processed an inauthentic approach to the survival challenge, in terms of pretending the three participants were happy with what they were doing. This kind of approach reflects the strong influence of the propaganda tradition of documentary making, in terms of presenting what the programme maker thinks the audience should know and leading the viewer to take an unquestioning viewing stance.

With programme makers becoming more sophisticated in mobilizing the audience's curiosity, in the sixth season, they learned to conspire with a local popular newspaper to expose a behind-the-scene "scandal", in terms of firing four contestants from the game²⁹. Such a breakthrough, to some extent, indicates that the crew started de-construct the supposed unity of "reality", or constructed of an extra "layer" to the reality experience they created, in order to creating some interesting stories to told to the public.

6.8 Conclusion

It can be said that to clarify the generic confusion surrounding the documentary hybrid production was a critical step for the Chinese pioneer reality production crew to form their particular production approach to new factual-based television format. In this hybrid production, different elements from different categories (fiction and non-fiction) were used to challenge viewers' established generic assumptions and to provide mass entertainment. The popularity of a reality programme is arguably to

²⁹ The example is examined in Chapter Nine from the perspective of the commercial operations of the reality series.

“capitalize on the tension between performance and authenticity, asking contestants and viewers to look for the “moment of truth” in a highly constructed and controlled television environment” (Mathijs, 2002, p.324). The previously perceived boundaries have now collapsed in the making of factual entertainment.

With the *TGCFS* producer’s understanding of the nature of mass television production deepening each season, their conception of hybrid documentary makers gradually leaned further and further to fictional genres. This shift shared many patterns with the debates that have been carried out in Western academia and public commentaries for more than a decade. At the same time, it also displays some Chinese cultural patterns.

The problems and obstacles that these pioneer hybrid documentary makers encountered in the making of the *TGCFS* format challenged their commitment to achieve their primarily conceived observational mode of documentary production. The solutions that the crew thought out in the exercise of balancing their aesthetic perceptions and responsibility for a good ratings performance generated many debates on what could be considered as the “appropriate” production methodology for making documentary hybrids. The ultimate result is that the programme makers’ willingness had to yield to the nature of mass produced television by sacrificing the authenticity of the televisual content.

In a growing commercialized production environment, these local television makers demonstrated their capability of quickly adapting to the new cultural climate and becoming more concerned with market needs. An audience needs were previously not the concern of Chinese documentary programme makers working for the state run broadcaster in the pre-commercialization days. In the post-WTO period, this factor becomes the driving force steering the *TGCFS* production approach gradually to moving closer to its Western commercial counterparts. This phenomenon can be attributed to the changing Chinese media landscape since the mid 1990s. As Li (2001) has argued, “while audience ratings were never especially important in the past, they have recently become the dominant factor for TV programming decisions’ (p.5).

This chapter has articulated some debates that the local producers had in order to achieve a more authentic approach to the real life experience they filmed, along with a common goal of presenting the real content with a high entertainment value. Since state-owned television have more complex interests to balance in the reforming era in comparison to Western commercial networks³⁰, the production agenda of this studied case involved a complex and dynamic interaction of different forces that shaped a programme that looks both familiar and exotic to Westerners. The following chapter continues the discussion of authenticity from the aspect of ordinary participants. The role and experience of Chinese participants in the *TGCF*S production elicits more interesting features of Chinese reality programming and provoke more debates on the practice of *localization* in the making of an outdoor survival format making.

³⁰ This point relates to Zhou He's idea of Party publicity Inc., which is explained in Chapter Three. The complexity of the management model and institutional structure of GDTV is also articulated in the Chapters Eight, Nine and Eleven.

Chapter Seven: The Role and Experience of Participants

“Corner (1995) argues that a key characteristic of television is to let people see for themselves” (cited in Hill, 2005, p.53). Reality TV as popular factual-based texts seems to provide sufficient examples to illustrate Corner’s perspective. In the last decade, one of the successful stories about the Reality TV phenomenon, repeated globally, is to open up media spaces to members of the public. Reality programme makers often like to recruit participants from members of the public and present their “once-in-a-life-time” experiences to the public in a gesture of omniscience. No matter how bizarre or unrealistic the circumstances those “real people” encounter in a reality programme, it is their shared languages, values, interests and cultural patterns that generate a sense of familiarity for viewers.

In the 1990s, television entertainment on the domestic television screen was dominated by performer-centred game shows and television dramas. The launch in China of the *TGCFs* series in the summer of 2000 signalled the beginning of a new television trend in China. As happened in the West, Reality TV in China started to extend the constitution of the television performers from professional actors to everyday working people. The role and experience of Chinese participants become important aspects in discussing localization of the outdoor survival format in a Chinese context.

Western studies have indicated that popular factual programmes often focus on a limited “demographic” of the participants which matches that of the majority viewer desired by advertisers (Palmer, 2002). Based on this viewpoint, the first part of this chapter attempts to articulate the production team’s major considerations in casting suitable participants for their project and their expectations of an “assumed audience”. The heated social discussion about the growing Chinese “Middle Class” is applied to explore how urban younger adults become the preferred participants and the target

viewer in the studied case, and extensively in the Chinese Reality TV market.

The second part of this chapter focuses on discussing the experience of participants. This production research examines the participant's motivations for participation and identifies several distinctive patterns of Chinese participants' presentation in relation to the idea of game playing and being on television. The process of adapting a Western-style reality format to the Chinese situation was not straightforward, but required adaptation from both the programme makers and participants. Therefore, the conflicts and contradictions of the participants' interests and the production team's expectations are explored to provide some insights into the complexity of making a reality programme featuring ordinary Chinese, in particular a Western style contest-based format in China. The arguments constructed in this chapter also reveal the nature of the adaptations and changes over the six seasons of the series and local programme makers' attempt to fine tune the series into a programme that would work for a changing audience.

7.1 The Role of Chinese Participants

Generally speaking, the travel-based formula and observational documentary techniques adopted in the filming of the *TGCFs* series establish a specific style in this local format. This style relies more on the participant to provide major content. As Director Jie Wu evaluates "contestants are the key to the success of the format" (personal communication, July 25, 2006). Featuring "ordinary" people in an entertainment-oriented programme both holds appeal to the audience and largely reduces the production cost. In basic terms, the recruitment of the participants in *TGCFs* relied heavily on open calls for auditions. How to pick the "right" participants to appeal to a large audience and to accomplish dramatic storytelling were great challenges for the local producers.

Usually about two months before the filming, the production team circulated

recruitment information through promos on domestically broadcast GDTV channels and press releases in major local newspapers. The recruitment advertisements for *TGCFs* often asked for bachelors/bachelorettes between the ages of eighteen to thirty-five who could speak fluent Mandarin¹ and were interested in outdoor sports. Every year these advertisements would attract thousands of volunteers from all walks of life to apply to participate and compete to be one of a very limited number of participants. The recruitment advertising gave the public an impression that this programme was open to all the people in the 20s and earlier 30s, because there was no specific requirement for performance skills, artistic talent or television experience. Nevertheless, the selection of the participant was a highly selective process similar to that of a television drama². A successful candidate often went through a four-step casting procedure, including an application form, telephone interview, audition and training.

The application form basically consisted of a resume of personal information, a description of their motivation for participating and some recent photos. According to the directors' judgement from a preliminary impression of the applicant, a large percentage of the applicants would be eliminated in the first stage. The remaining candidates then would then be invited to attend the audition held in GDTV after a telephone interview to ensure their interest in participation and a capability for verbal expression. A face-to-face interview would give the crew a more vivid idea about the candidate. In the final stages of the recruitment, the number of candidates who made it to the training was usually about twice what the production needed. Training was a repertoire of the casting agenda of the *TGCFs* which provided a chance for directors to have a close look at would-be candidates.

Participants would be selected to serve the needs of the production. However, they

¹ Chinese people share the same written language, but have diversified dialects. Mandarin Chinese is the official broadcasting language in China. It can be understood by Chinese living in different regions and speaking different dialects.

² In Chapter Six, the director's inclination for selecting good looking single candidates for potential love affairs is discussed from the aspect of introducing a dramatic approach to the *TGCFs* project.

were volunteers, but not paid actors. To a certain extent, filming with ordinary peoples was much challenging than working with trained actors. Director Hui Han believes that “the more accurately I understand the participant, the more efficiently I have control of the production” (personal communication, August 14, 2006). In the production history, training was developed from simply outdoor exercises for physical fitness to a military-style camp for multiple tasks. A two-week training was often arranged by the crew to confine candidates in some remote area for the purpose of enhancing their physical strength, learning outdoor survival skills and getting used to being filmed. By observing them carrying out various given tasks in highly competitive and physically demanding circumstances for a period of time, the crew could achieve a more comprehensive recognition of each candidate. Consequently, this important procedure of recruitment would help the director to make the best choice in selecting the “cast”.

7.2 The Criteria of Casting

Within the system of casting, the *TGCFS* programme maker’s decision making on a “suitable” candidate was based on a comprehensive consideration of a set of criteria, including age, gender, martial status, appearance, personality, occupation, education, region, vocal expression, physical fitness and outdoor experience. Although the format of the *TGCFS* series experienced a change from life experience to gamedoc during its six years of production history, the programme makers’ major concerns in the selection of participants remained the same. Production supervisor Chun Yan generalizes that “the first is the concern of the viewing audience. The second is the quality of the participant, including education, appearance and ability of expression, talk and manner” (Chun Yan, personal communication, August 23, 2006). Yan highlights two crucial factors that could lead the production to succeed in the ratings battle. One is to cater for the viewing interest of their target audience and the other is to satisfy the filming crew’s requirements for televisual effects.

Although the number of participants was varied in each season (a minimum of three participants in the first season and maximum of thirty-six participants in the sixth season), the lineup of the participants always covered a wide range of people with diverse demographics and traits. Production supervisor Hong Huang argues that “the successful candidates should demonstrate vivid codes of different groups of people in society” (personal communication, June 19, 2006). Such an approach not only allows the viewer to recognize the participant who belongs to their own type and social group, but someone who is also beneficial to the demand for drama³.



Figure 19 Three Participants of the 1st Season: Jun Zhang, Yin Huang and Dao Lü

In the example of the casting of the first season, GDTV producers selected three participants with typical Chinese social backgrounds and different personalities (See Figure 19). Twenty-seven year old Yin Wang was an air hostess for Singapore Airline. She came from a well-off diplomat family in Beijing and belonged to the so-called “golden collar” in China. The 27 year old self-employed Jun Zhang was a retired soldier living in Beijing who was seeking success by running his own business. Thirty year old Poet Lü Dao grew up in the economically undeveloped rural area in the south China and worked as a temporary employee in GDTV and was struggling to settle down in the metropolis Guangzhou.

In the series, the three participants also demonstrated very different characteristics.

³ The foregrounding of drama in the production approach of the *TGCFs* is analyzed in Chapter Six.

Dao Lü was a poet who was passionate and romantic, but lacked basic living skills. He made an interesting contrast to Jun Zhang who seemed cool and mysterious, but was experienced in outdoor survival skills. Yin Wang made a good balance through her femininity and professional character, in terms of appearing caring and hardworking. Moreover, the complex image of Dao Lü as intellectual and countryman with an inferiority complex created a great contrast to his travel partners who had strong urban identities and great confidence. By featuring the interaction among the three stereotypical participants, local producers attempt to provide viewers with some mirror images of the contemporary Chinese young generation.

Urban youth and white-collars were assumed to be the group of people that had massive audience appeal. They belong to the so-called Chinese 'growing middle class' which has high education and/or high income. In contrast, people who belong to the low-income category, such as industrial workers, rural workers and unemployed people were largely absent in the survival-based format. Although in contemporary Chinese society, the urban middle class has not become the majority of the population⁴, this social group is regarded as a key demographic for Chinese mainstream media and the main force for cultural consumption in the past two decades.

7.2.1 Urban Young Middle Class

As discussed in section 5.2.1 in Chapter Five, the debut of *TGCFS* in 2000 coincided with a boom in outdoor sports culture among the urban young population. Attributed to the cultural climate, outdoor sports rapidly developed as both mainstream culture and socially-desired leisure activities appreciated by the Chinese urban middle class in the early 2000s. The specific age range of the participants was associated with local programme makers' assumptions of those demographic groups interested in the

⁴ "In China about 30 % of the urban population own more than 80% of financial resources. The population of the Chinese middle class was estimated at around two million in the early 2000s" (Chen and Yi, 2004, p.475).

subject of outdoor adventure in China. According to local journalist Weibin Hu's⁵ observation of public interest in the programme, "every year *TGCFS* attracted many white-collars who have a relatively higher income to apply for participation" (personal communication, August 28, 2006). They are Chinese reality programme makers' favourite social groups; sensitive to the popular Western life style, curious about the rural life and willing to undertake physical challenges in nature. Chinese commentators also indicated that "no matter whether the participant or the audience of the outdoor survival format programmes are urban residents who live in a easy and comfortably life. The primitive natural environment was unacquainted and intriguing to them" (Zhang & Zhang, 2003).

The original idea of a survival challenge was derived from a Chinese cultural concept, called "Ku lü"⁶ which refer to a type of travel aiming to obtaining valuable experience from enduring hardships rather than gaining superficial pleasure from the comfortable arrangement and modern convenience. This kind of travel model became popular among urban youth in later 1990s. In this reality programme, participants were arranged to take up a "Ku Lü" style adventure and visit many remote areas in China where are relatively undeveloped in economy and less modernized in life style. The great contrast between the modern urban living environment and less civilized rural life held a great attraction to many urban residents. Three participants from the metropolis in the first season of *TGCFS* all expressed their high interest in conducting natural explorations and backpacker-style travel. The Air hostess Yin Wang asserted that

Those places covered in the journey and the backpacker travel style both have irresistible appeal to me. I have never travelled as a backpacker before, but I saw many backpackers travelling in Europe. I would like to take this chance to give it a try (personal communication, September 1, 2006).

⁵ Mr. Hu worked for Guangdong Television Week who reported on the third and fourth season of *TGCFS*.

⁶ "Ku lü" is a Chinese term ("Ku" can be translated as hardships; and "lü" means travel or journey). It refers to a type of travel which involves a cultural context of obtaining valuable experience from enduring hardships rather than through gaining pleasure from comfortable arrangements and modern conveniences.

Retired soldier Jun Zhang had already experienced the most fashionable travel style. He claims that “I took a self-driving tour to Xinjiang in 1999 when the backpacker style travel had just emerged” (personal communication, November 18, 2006). This unexplored travel route along China’s overland border held a great attraction for him. Poet Dao Lü was highly interested in the idea of access to the natural environment to release his stress caused by urbanism and living pressures. He claimed that

We hitchhiked for 195 days. The six months was a process for the three of us to release our stress caused by living in the urban city. [...] Moreover, this programme expresses my yearning for nature and freedom (personal communication, August 14, 2006).

He elicited a psychological insight into the outdoor sports culture which is an important aspect of generating a resonance to the urban population’s living circumstances. The production provided an opportunity to escape from their everyday lives and put real life troubles out of their heads for a period of time. Dao Lü actually was a temporarily employee of GDTV who was involved in developing the production plan for *TGCFS* and volunteered to be one of the three participants out of personal interest. Like thousands of other rural graduates, Lü was struggling to settle down in the metropolis Guangzhou. Making contact with nature allowed him to relieve the stresses of his real life struggles.

As Chinese people’s access to information on tourism became more convenient in the early 2000s, “lü you⁷” emerged through online travel forums who were enthusiastic for contact with nature and exotic cultural experiences. They soon became the major force in applying for the outdoor survival format programme. Many applicants of the *TGCFS* fashionable began to call themselves “lü you” since the third season. Several Shenzhen⁸ “lü you” who met on a website called “mo fang⁹” even applied to attend

⁷ This newly invented Chinese term derived from the Chinese provocation of the phrase of “travel”. This term refers to a type of traveller who prefers self-budget travel, such as camping and backpacking.

⁸ Shenzhen is a city located in Guangdong province. It is an economic special zone and one of the few cities

the fifth season as a team.

Generally speaking, featuring the life experiences of fashionable Chinese urban youth allowed those locally produced *Survivor*-like programmes to attract a large audience who were anxious about their socially-desired life styles and demonstrated up-to-date mainstream cultural trends and values. Such intentions of the local producers became more and more clear with the production of *TGCFs* turning to become more ratings-centred. However, in the production history of the *TGCFs* series, there was also an exception.



Figure 20 Participants in the 2nd season *Retracing the Long March Route*

The second season *Retracing the Long March Route* is a unique case among the six seasons of the *TGCFs*. Due to the subject of revolutionary history, its programming had a propaganda context¹⁰. Therefore, the casting of the second season not only widened the age limits from 30s to 50 years old (See Figure 20), but it also broadened the target social strata in order to address all citizens. The range of the participants

where Chinese outdoor sports culture started to emerge in the mid 1990s.

⁹ “Mong fang” is a pioneering theme website for budget travel and outdoor sports. It is well known by Chinese outdoor sports players. It has its origins as a BBS board, named “Shenzhen Mo fang” which was founded by a group of Shenzhen residents in June 2000. Due to its close location, “lü You” from Shenzhen made up a large number of the applications in each season.

¹⁰ The dynamics between the political subject and gamedoc formula is examined in Chapter Eight.

thereby was made up of blue-collars, white collars, peasants, soldiers, students, intellectuals, artists, civil servants and a private business owner.



Figure 21 An all-single female cast in the 3rd season *Heroine's cross Heaven Pass*

Due to the political function of the second season, its casting creates an interesting contrast to that of the later seasons which often involve a strongly commercial agenda. The following season, *Heroine's cross Heaven Pass*, adopted a very different approach to the casting, in terms of featuring 12 urban modern girls (see Figure 21) and involved a strong commercial agenda. Producer Li Xiaoming comments that

There are great contrasts between the contestant of the second and the third season. The third season has distinctive urban signs, in terms of their appearance, manner and value of the contestant in the third season. Overall, participants' level of education and their presentation in front of the camera had an obvious upgrade (personal communication, November 30, 2006).

The market-driven agenda of the third season was the programme makers' direct response to the competitive domestic television market¹¹. From then on the foregrounding of the urban identities of the cast in the programming of *TGCFS* demonstrated this local reality production's intention to satisfy the commercially

¹¹ The commercial operation applied in the third season is discussed in Chapter Nine.

valuable middle stratum and “sell them” to commercial sponsors and advertisers.

7.2.2 Occupational Appeal

Besides those general patterns in the casting which emerged in the local production of the *TGCFS* format as mentioned above, there were also some more specific criteria that had a great impact on the decision making of the casting. Apart from featuring a group of bachelors and bachelorettes sparking romance in adversity (as discussed in Chapter Six), occupational appeal was another important factor in raising public’s curiosity about the programme. The social and professional background of participants functioned as an important criteria in the decision making of the participants since the inaugural season. Throughout the six seasons of *TGCFS*, candidates whose professional roles belong to high income categories (e.g. air hostess, lawyer, professional manager, advertiser and artist), fast growing industries (e.g. IT industry, fashion industry, media industry and tourism industry and/or socially respected careers (e.g. education, military, medical care and cultural institutions) received great attention from the programme makers and the viewers. Their social and economic status brought them confidence and social awareness.

In the example of the first season, the professional background of Yin Wang as an air hostess for Singapore Airlines was a major factor in making her a successful candidate. In 2000, to be an air hostess was a desirable job for many Chinese. Director Hui Han asserts that “her annual income was ¥ 200,000 (US\$ 25,000) which was an unreachable figure to the majority of Chinese at that time” (personal communication, August 14, 2006). The two male participants in the first season also had distinctive social backgrounds.

Dao Lü’s status as a young poet was heavily stressed in the narrative. However, writing poems was not his livelihood. His other status as a member of the production team was generally muted in the series. Director Hui Han explained the reason why

they foregrounded his status of poet; “at that time the status of poet had some attraction to the public. The public imagination towards poets has a sense of romanticism” (personal communication, August 14, 2006).

Likewise, Jun Zhang’s status as a retired soldier was also appealing to the directors. As with intellectuals, the military is a very socially-respected vocation in China. In this Chinese production, people who had army backgrounds became a regular part of the cast in the lineups of participants. They are often presented as the role model for other participants because of their leadership and responsibility and impressed the viewers with their distinctive survival skills and physical strength. It can be said that to take the participant’s professional role into account in the casting process was crucial for the programme to reach its target audience and reduce market risks.

7.2.3 Regional Division

Regional identity is another important criterion of casting. An emphasis on the regional diversity of the participant reflected local producers’ specific concerns with the domestic market and programming. In the last two decades, contest-based shows aired in domestically broadcast satellite channels often selected contestants from different regions in order to attract a nationwide audience. Such arrangements can create an intimacy to viewers in different regions.

This pattern can also be identified from the casting of this pioneer reality format made by GDTV located in a Cantonese speaking region. This pattern can be identified from the casting of *TGCFS* from its original season. The southern production crew selected one male participant in Guangdong and sought two other participants in the northern capital Beijing by circulating recruitment information among Beijing mainstream newspapers. This arrangement manifested GDTV’s ambition to secure the local audience as well as compete for a national audience. The special requirement for participants to be Mandarin-speaking also served the purpose of making a programme for a nationwide audience.

With the increase of the number of participants from three to sixteen in the second season, the selection of participants achieved a broader representation of the nation¹² including Hong Kong. The casting of the third season even extended the territorial coverage from domestic to international, with the involvement of a Singapore participant making the *TGCFs* series an international event.

To group peoples with diversified regional characteristics and cultural habits in an intense living environment was also a strategy of stimulating interesting interactions between contestants. However, working on a non-scripted production, local reality programme makers encountered a mismatch between the participants' expectations of a survival challenge and the game nature of the television programme. Several unique patterns of Chinese participants displayed in the production of the *TGCFs* contribute to the cultural discourse of this localized *Survivor*-style production.

7.3 The Experience of Chinese Participants

Globally speaking, a popular reality format in its varied local versions could appear similar in its logos, setups and production patterns. Nevertheless, it is often the locally-recruited participants who create differences to distinguish one from another. Although programme makers attempt to select “appropriate” candidates and fix them to certain roles by game rules, producers can only partly control the “performance” of their participants in the process of making a reality programme. China’s unique political-economic environment and socio-cultural context had a profound influence on the Chinese participants’ engagement with the “survival of the fittest” competition in a ratings-driven reality production.

Some distinctive patterns of Chinese participants reflected in the televisual presentation of the *TGCFs* series and revealed in the behind-the-scenes investigation of the production make an interesting contrast to those of Western participants in

¹² Mainland China consists of thirty-one provinces.

Survivor. Chinese participants' shared motivations of participating in an outdoor survival challenge and their general reactions to being subject to television making largely influenced their negative attitudes towards game playing.

7.3.1 Lack of Game Spirit

Interviews with *TGCFS* crew members suggested that a 'lack of game spirit' was a characteristic shared by Chinese participants throughout the six seasons. Such a pattern created many obstacles for these local pioneer reality programme makers to achieve their goal of making participants fully engaged in the contrived made-for-TV scenarios. No matter whether the *TGCFS* format involved competition and cash prizes or not, it essentially was a made-for-TV game in which ordinary people were required to live according to certain rules in a contrived situation for the ultimate purpose of entertaining a mass audience. However, Chinese participants, particularly in the earlier two seasons, generally lacked awareness of the game nature of *TGCFS*.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, many participants' motivations for participating in *TGCFS* were associated with travel and self challenge. Fourteen participants interviewed from across six seasons were all passionate about taking the opportunity to see the country and the world with necessary expenses fully covered, and to satisfy their willingness to challenge their personal limits with their personal safety guaranteed.

In the production history, the *TGCFS* series covers many non-commercial domestic travel routes (e.g. national borderline, the Long March path, the Silk Road) and exotic overseas locations (e.g. Saipan, New Zealand, Greece and Canada). The rich natural resources and cultural spectacle provided by the unique travel experience held great appeal to participants. Moreover, the subject of the programme, "The great challenge for survival challenge" echoes a cultural conception of outdoor sports which could satisfy many Chinese participants' expectation of challenging their personal limits in

an unfriendly natural environment

In the *TGCFs* series, “Not giving up” was a widely-acclaimed slogan repeatedly uttered by Chinese participants in the interviews to express their determination to make unremitting efforts to conquer all difficulties and hardships. Such an emphasis made a contrast to the *Survivor* series in which Western participants appeared more likely to stress to the camera their ambition of taking the ultimate reward home. From this perspective, Chinese participants seemed to demonstrate spirit of sports rather than a spirit of game-playing. As a result, “self-growth” as a main outcome of the survival challenge was heavily addressed in interviews with the participants in the later episodes, those which are closer to the end of their journey. A similar pattern can also be found in the Japanese version of *Survivor* in which testing human limits is a common goal of most of the contestants (Iwabuchi, 2004).

The mismatching of the participant’s personal expectations for a survival experience and their real circumstance of serving the interests of the programme makers inevitably generated conflicts between the production team and participants. Although participants all had signed a contract with GDTV before their departure and agreed to obey the arrangements of a filming crew, voluntarily withdrawing from the filming was a common scenario which occurred throughout the production history (examples of this aspect are discussed in detail in Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten).

Other Chinese reality production teams working on the “last people standing” formula also had the same headache. For instance, in the summer of 2006, three contestants of Shanghai Oriental Satellite Television’s *The Apprentice*-like *Wise Man Takes it All* (*Chuangzhi Yinjia*) (2005) suddenly announced their decision to withdraw from competition to an on-air camera during a live broadcast. This unexpected occurrence generated public debate over the issue of the adaptability of Chinese participants to Western derived “Reality TV” programming. Public commentary pointed out that “Chinese participants in ‘Reality TV’ programmes had continuously exposed the lack

of an ‘entertainment spirit’ – disregarding rules, a voluntarily call to stop” (Xinhuanet.com, 2005). Here, “entertainment spirit” is an alternative term for “game spirit” which refers to participants’ consciousness of obeying the game rules and serving the production crew’s needs for providing factual entertainment to the public.

In the case of *TGCFs*, the Chinese participants’ lack of game consciousness and concerns for the public image the *TGCFs* format created some interesting contrasts with Western participants. In *Survivor* and many other popular reality shows, Western contestants often play wildly at knocking their teammates out of the competition to secure their own place in the game. “This is a game!” is a popular answer for their betrayals and conspiracies and a manifesto of their attitude towards the contrived television activity. Nevertheless, in the Chinese case, a gambling for rewards and a seeking for fame were not the dominant reasons for the Chinese participants to surrender three to six months of their time, leave behind their comfortable lives and even give up their jobs to participate in a television production.

7.3.1.1 Against the Elimination Strategy

The *Survivor*-style competition was applied to the *TGCFs* format to enhance the entertainment value of the series since its second season, *Retracing the Long March* (2001). In order to accommodate the reality programming to an increasingly ratings-driven environment as well as the revolutionary subject, local directors selectively borrowed *Survivor* elements of a two-team contest, periodical elimination and a tribal council, and blended them into the *Airway Boys*-style hitchhiking formula. This kind of programming blurs the line between outdoor survival experience and competition and consequently intensifies the conflict of interest between the programme maker and the participant.

Surely, competition is nothing new to Chinese people. Nevertheless, *Survivor*-style competition, in terms of encouraging outwitting and back-stabbing each other in order

to win the game was widely argued as against traditional values and morals¹³. Chinese society has been influenced by both the deep-rooted Confucian notion of “harmony”, the socialistic ideology of collectivism and the heavily promoted slogan of “Friendship first, competition second”¹⁴. Based on those conceptions, a socially-acclaimed competition spirit in a Chinese context foregrounds the experience of participation over the outcome of the competition.

Chinese participant’s concerns of harmony, collectivism and friendship as a long-established cultural tradition inevitably resulted in participants’ common attitudes against any “voting-off” strategy. The contradiction seems particularly sharp in the second season with its political overtones, because the ideological context of the Long March involved a strong sense of collectivism¹⁵; whereas voting people out of the game encourages participants to be more concerned with their individual need to secure their own place in the game.

The contradictions also generated public curiosity. Shortly after the completion of the first run broadcast of the second season, *Nanfang Metropolis*¹⁶ interviewed eight contestants who made it to the end to explore their personal responses to the Western *Survivor*-style competition. Guangdong participant Qintong Zhu said that

The elimination system was the biggest obstacle. It was very troubling that teammates in the contest became opponents in the tribal council [...]. When the “voting off” was announced to begin in mid July, I wanted to leave the team and travel alone and I cried during my farewell to teammates (Dou, 2001).

¹³ As mentioned in Chapter Three, Chinese public commentaries and academic writing about the localization of Western derived “Reality TV” in particular in the early 2000s have been mainly focused on discussing these kind of cultural conflicts. The original *Survivor* was viewed as the prototype of a Western gamedoc in Chinese public and academic debates on the cultural inadaptability of the Western-style competition within a Chinese ethical context.

¹⁴ Originally, this was a slogan of the “Ping-Pong Diplomacy” in the 1970s which has been heavily promoted by the Party to influence a generation’s attitude towards competition (Anthony, 2004, Mangan and Hong, 2007).

¹⁵ The concept of the “Long March spirit” foregrounds collective goals and calls for being united to fight.

¹⁶ *Nanfang Metropolis* (*Nanfang dushi bao*) is a Guangdong-based popular newspaper.



1 The losing team in a game holds a tribal council



2 Qingtong Zhu twisting a pen clockwise to select a teammate as a nominee by chance



3 The eliminated contestant blacking out the light representing her place in the game

Figure 22 The cream of clips from a tribal council in the 2nd season

In the beginning of the second season, not only the participants, but also members of production team struggled to apply a “voting off” strategy to their programming¹⁷. Director Hong Huang points out that “the participants’ reaction towards the ‘voting off’ strategy were displayed as verbal protest and retreatment from the filming” (personal communication June 1, 2006). In order to keep the production on the rails, producers often played an important role dissuading Qingtong Zhu and other participants to change their minds about quitting the game. To a large extent, participants’ attitude against a “voting-off” strategy was anticipated by programme makers, but some of their reactions were unexpected.

¹⁷ When the crew first time applied a *Survivor*-style periodical elimination system and tribal council to the *TGCF*S format, this approach generated debates among the team members and generated a collective attitude against the idea. The process of propelling the game rules in practice in fact involved a series of struggles and negotiations. More behind-the-scenes stories are revealed in Chapter Eight.

In the Chinese version of tribal councils, the audience could witness some contestants voting themselves off or randomly selecting a group member by different means in the early stage episodes (see Figure 22. It has an example of a tribal council in the second season, in which the participant Qingtong Zhu chose a randomly selected nominee in a *Survivor-like* tribal council). Hong Kong participants Shumei Chen (25 years old, office clerk) admits that

I held an opposite attitude against the elimination system. However, we had no choice, but to obey this ‘game’ rule [...]. I nearly broke down when the first teammate was eliminated. Therefore, in the later tribal councils, I adopted a passive method – drawing straws. The list includes me, because I could not bear to ‘kick’ anyone out of the game. I had developed friendships (Dou, 2001).

With no strong sense of competition and lack of interest in gambling, contestants often became very concerned for friendships developed during the filming. Moreover, in a Chinese cultural context, surrendering individual needs to help other people to achieve their goals or sacrificing their personal desires for the community’s good were considered to be the “right” behaviour by Chinese participants and viewers, matching the orthodox socialist ideology. Therefore, for those Chinese participants, voting one contestant out of the losing team in the weekly tribal council was unethical behaviour and a frustrating process to go through. During the interviews with *Nanfang Metropolis*, participants Li lin (24 year old Guangdong freelancer) and Xiangke Hou (22 year old Guangdong retired soldier) both responded to the questions of how to mentally adjust themselves to the unpleasant contrived situation of eliminating teammates during the competition by trying “to treat the activity as a game” (Dou, 2001). In this Chinese case, to view the contrived situation as a game was not taken for granted by Chinese participants at the beginning. Instead, it was a strategy developed according to the situation. From a production perspective, such an attitude did not solve the core problem of participants' lack of game spirit, because participants’ guilty conscience merely led to a drop in their morale to a low level after a few runs of the group competitions.

7.3.1.2 Sharing the Reward

The temporary setback in the exercise of integrating some *Survivor* elements into the established hitchhiking format did not stop local programme makers from continuously making efforts to stimulate in Chinese participants a competitive consciousness. In the following season, *Heroine cross Heaven Pass* (2002), detaching political subjects from the ratings-driven production, the promised ¥ 200,000 (about US\$ 25,000)¹⁸ cash prize was offered to encourage participants to be well engaged in game playing. Such a setup indicates the GDTV makers' ambition to trigger fierce competition among Chinese participants. The original *Survivor* had proved that a promised one million dollars reward can create an irresistible attraction to Western contestants. The RMB 200,000 cash prize in the *TGCFS* was the maximum amount of money allowed to be given out on television according to media regulations of the time. However, this commercial element did not achieve the same effect as it created in the Western production.

Generally speaking, in the third season those Chinese pioneer reality programme makers became more sophisticated in controlling the filming, and participants also appeared more game conscious with the prevalence of reality programming on domestic screens. Nevertheless, the scenario of participants quitting the game to protest the elimination system happened continually in the third season due to their lack of a strong willingness to gamble on the cash prize.

¹⁸ In 2001, the average GDP was US\$ 3,570 in China (Chinese Academy of Science, 2005). Therefore, ¥ 200,000 (about US\$ 25,000) is a considerable figure for most of the Chinese participants.



1 A graphic illustrating 3 contestants (Hong Yu, Nannan Tang and Lin Qiu) attempting to ally with Min Liu to against other two girls (Lin Li and Yilei Chen)



2 In a *Survivor*-like tribal council 3 contestants (Hong Yu, Nannan Tang and Lin Qiu) assumed that Min Liu would ally with them



3 Min Liu secretly allies with other two teammates and eventually voted Hong Yu out of the game



4 Hong Yu's unexpected leaving was a shock for her friend

Figure 23 The cream of clips from the most dramatic tribal council in the 3rd season

During the two-week training in the preproduction stage, directors were aware that the girls had developed friendships. In order to encourage their competitiveness, several subgroups who bonded through friendship were divided into two teams.

However, in the first stage of competition in Saipan, participants Lin Qiu (30 year old Guangdong lawyer), Nannan Tan (24 year old Shandong office clerk) and Xü Yang (29 year old Lanzhou nurse) from two teams quit the game shortly after their friend Hong Yu (27 year old Shanxi engineer) was eliminated in the second run of the tribal council (See Figure 23 for the tribal council which caused Hong Yu's departure). This episode made Shanghai girl Min Liu (24 years old AE of IT service) a controversial participant among the other participants and viewers. In order to secure her a place in the competition, Liu played the game strategically by betraying the three teammates' trust and allied with another two to reverse the power balance within the team. Facing wild critiques from other contestants, she was full of grievance and said to the camera that "This is only a game. I am the one who obey the game rules the most". It was the first time that the viewers witnessed a Chinese participant openly admitting a game attitude towards the media activity. However, such an arrangement was still unable to make most of participants fully engage in the game. By the end of the first stage of competition in Saipan, there were the only six contestants left in the game. Due to the unexpected drop in numbers of participants within a month, the crew had to adjust the production plan. They postponed the beginning of the second stage competition in China for a week and found two substitutes from the initial list of candidates. This example clearly indicates that the essential problem of a lack of game spirit still remained unsolved in the third season.

The involvement of a cash prize in fact generated a new issue in relation to the game spirit and brought drama to the series in an unexpected way, in terms of sharing the reward with teammates. During the finale of the third season, Shanghai girl Min Liu and Shantou girl Lin Li faced the final voting by a nineteen-member jury¹⁹. Lin Li initially was widely considered to have a much better chance to win the game. However, Min Liu, the winner of the third season dramatically subverted her inferior position by promising "I would share the ¥ 200,000RMB (about US\$ 25,000) with

¹⁹ The jury was made up of eight eliminated participants, eight journalists who reported on the event, two local men who acted as guests of the production during the 33 day survival experience in Saipan. During the finale, it was up to them to decide the winner of the third season.

every teammate if I win the game” at the last minute before the final voting. This announcement helped Min Liu to beat Lin Li’s claim of “treating everyone to a big meal”. This controversial strategy for winning the game immediately generated wide social debate. According to the observations of a local journalist,

In the following few days, the press and internet surged with a raging tide of criticism. Audiences not only expressed their own opinions of this result, but also evaluated the reality television formats. Various perspectives in regards to the human nature and social meaning presented in the programmes were articulated (cited in, Wang, 2002).

This report also directly quoted some typical comments proved by net users in response to the local press’s sarcastic description of the dramatic “face-to-face” competition as “a villain vs. a hypocrite”. One net user comments that

Initially, I had a lot of curiosity while watching this programme. However, as the competition carried on, the programme started to reflect a weird flavour. Survival indeed is a type of capability. As a programme organized by the media, it should not let this kind of intriguing against each other to be fully carried out (cited in, Wang, 2002).

Another net user criticizes that

To those contestants, this kind of survival challenge could be of benefit to their work in the future, in terms of using dirty strategies to achieve their goals. However, it does no good to the sound development of society (cited in, Wang, 2002).

Those comments provided some insights into Chinese’s audience reception of Western derived reality programming, in particular their adaptation to the Western style competition. Min Liu explained her motivation of sharing the rewards during in interview²⁰ with the journalist of Xinhua News Agency. She said that

²⁰ The finale of the third season, named “face-to-face” competition was aired on October 24, 2002. The journalist of Xinhua Net’s Guangdong Channel interviewed three contestants (Min Liu, Lin Li and Ting Guo who made it to the final stage of the competition in New Zealand) and two directors, Hong Huang and Hui Han. The report of this interview was titled to address the question of “What ‘The Survival Challenge for Survival’ is a challenge for ?” (Wang, November 11, 2002)

I was very frustrated. I did not care much about the money, but I cared about being the champion very much. I wished to win the reward after completing such a long journey. Every contestant bore a lot of hardships. I would like to share the money with everyone (Wang, 2002).

In order to reduce the negative public reaction to the programme and participants, GDTV arranged a charity activity. Champion Liu Min and other two participants, Hong Yu and Lin Qiu voluntarily donated their portions of the cash prize, 30,000 RMB (about 3750 USD) to a primary school located in a remote area in the northwest of China. About a month after the competition, Min Liu as a representative travelled with a GDTV crew to Qinghai province and revisited this school that had given her a great impression during her journey along the Yellow River months before (see Figure 24).



Figure 24 Champion Min Liu presenting a donation to Shilonggong primary school on November 24, 2002

Although the activity of the third season entered into its climax with Min Liu strategically reversing the outcome, and a seemingly unequal match and subsequent revisit provided a good story for GDTV to extend its influence after the first run, the directors of *TGCFs* disagreed with the idea of sharing rewards with other participants. Director Hui Han expressed his concerns on the issue:

When I heard Min Liu sharing the reward, my reaction was to ponder the imperfection of the game rules. I actually object to this kind of

means, because it makes the competition seem less cruel and lacks any ultimate suspense. If sharing the reward is not allowed, the competition would seem more authentic. She made a bad start (personal communication, August 14, 2006).

In the production of later seasons, the programme makers were continuously making efforts to create a competition atmosphere. However, sharing the cash reward between the contestants who made it to the finale repeatedly occurred. Those participants who could make to the final run often attempted to reach an agreement on sharing the cash prize behind the directors' back. Interviews with a group of participants who made it to the finale of each season found that a sense of gambling would emerge when the journey is moving close to the end. However, compared with the idea of bringing a cash prize home, many Chinese participants seemed to care more about the honour, in terms of gaining the title of the champion to prove their survival ability and reward their efforts. Strategically speaking, reaching an agreement of sharing rewards among a small number of competitive participants in the final stage of the competition released the pressure on participants. More importantly such a deal guarantees no matter who finally wins the game, every participant who made it to the final run would be rewarded a certain amount of money. The moderation and harmony of Confucianism was well practiced in this case. However, from the programme makers' perspective, such arrangements largely affected the fairness of the competition and reduced any tension in the competition.

All these unique reactions towards the cash prize indicates that this element was unable to effectively evoke people's game spirit. On the contrary, sharing the prize affected the fairness of the competition and was a disadvantage to encouraging a competitiveness in game playing. This became a key problem which required the crew to come up with solutions. In the production history, these Chinese pioneer reality programme makers always expected to find more Western-like participants in order to create a drastic competition against each other to create high ratings. Nevertheless, it turned out to be a difficult task (this aspect is discussed later in this

chapter). They eventually had to develop special strategies to nurture the Chinese participants' game spirit. With the increase in their production experience, the crew learned to take advantage of training to develop candidates' game spirit in the preproduction of the fourth season and by utilizing a specially designed "1+2+3" game model to encourage their competitiveness²¹.

7.3.2 Avoiding the Camera

In the local production, the participants' common interests in the subject of an outdoor survival challenge not only conflicted with the game nature of the format, but also contradicted with the mediated nature of reality television making. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, although successful candidates all gave their consent to being recorded by the crew by signing a contract, in practice those Chinese participants were not necessarily collaborative in the actual filming.

"Being on television" was not a favourable idea for many Chinese participants, in particular those in the earlier two seasons. Production supervisor Hong Huang argues that

Presentation in front of the camera was very different between Chinese and Western participants. Chinese "challengers" often imagined that there were a billion people watching them through the camera lens. Yi Wang and Jun Zhang even did not want to be filmed holding their hands. In contrast, Western 'challengers' often regarded the camera as an opportunity for self-expression and presentation (personal communication, June 16, 2006).

During the filming of the inaugural season, the filming crew perceived that Yin Wang and Jun Zhang had become lovers and attempted to find evidence. However, the two participants carefully hid their relationship from the filming crew to protect their

²¹ An introduction to these "1+2+3" game rules is included in Chapter Ten. The unique functions of this original design Chinese style game formula was planned to solve the problem of Chinese participants' lack of game spirit and the cultural inadaptability of the Western competition model to the Chinese situation is also explained in this chapter.

privacy. Their attitude made the audience very interested in the storyline of their “real life” experience, but this remained just a suspicion in the series. According to Wang Yin,

During our journey, Zhang Jun and I did have a relationship, but this was very personal [...]. We did not want to show it on TV, so we tried to avoid being discovered (personal communication, September 1, 2006).

In this Chinese pioneer reality production, participants demonstrated a very different interest in being the object of television entertainment in comparison to their Western counterparts. Seeking fame is a globally popular motivation for many ordinary people to be part of a high-profile media event, “sacrificing one’s privacy in exchange for what is often a very brief, though intense period of media exposure” (Kilborn, 2003, p.187). However, in this local production, participants presented themselves in a contrasting way, in terms of avoiding the camera and being conservative in commenting on others. Wang Yin admits that

I did not think too much about the television production, but care more about the journey. The travel route was very appealing to me. I would rather no filming was involved, because it made me feel uncomfortable (personal communication, September 1, 2006).

Travelling with a filming crew following, participants received much attention from people on the street. For ordinary people who were not prepared for such public attention, the “celebrity-like” treatment often seemed disturbing to Jun Zhang and Yin Wang during their journey. Moreover, the filming crew’s intrusion of and interference with their “real life” experience would also affect participants’ attitude towards the filming.

As mentioned in Chapter Six, there were merely two weeks difference between the filming and the screening of the *TGCFs* series. This working model determined that the filming crew had to work on a tight time schedule. In order to meet the deadline and provide sufficient content, directors had to take control of certain parts of the

filming process by adjusting the initial travel routine, manipulating participants' survival tasks and exploring their privacy in order to serve the needs of the camera.

Jun Zhang admits that

I initially did not think much about the television, but after one week I arrived in Guangzhou, I started to have a feeling of how media works, in particular television media [...]. I could not get used to being filmed. I tried to avoid the camera (personal communication, November 18, 2006).

Jun Zhang chose to hide from the camera and play quiet during the journey which became a headache for the production team. In this case, participant Dao Lü as a member of the production crew assisted the crew in making stories to maintain audience appeal²². However, these Chinese outdoor survival programmes, by and large, relied on non-trained everyday people to fulfil the crew's needs of stories. Therefore, those local programme makers had to adjust their casting criteria to solve the problems which emerged in the inaugural season. The emphasis of the casting was shifted from concerns with the physical appeal of the ordinary people to their mental adaptations to television making. Director Hong Huang reflected that

It does not matter how good a participant looks, but it is crucial for the participant to have distinctive characteristics. It is also fine if a participant lacks physical strength and has no experience in outdoor sports. Most importantly, a participant needs to be expressive, who can present him/herself in front of the camera (personal communication, July 25, 2006).

Local producers learned from experience that they not only needed to find people who were suitable for the subject, but who were also willing to collaborate with the filming crew in completing the production plan. However, to find a Chinese volunteer who could satisfy the directors' needs of honestly commenting on others, openly presenting him/herself to the camera and be fully engaged in the game playing was a difficult task. In the production history, these kinds of "ideal" participants were rare.

²² In Chapter Six, participant Dao Lü's self consciousness of conspiring with the filming crew to make interesting stories for the cameras is examined from the perspective of the authenticity of the show.



Figure 25 A staged image of Sam in the titling sequence of the 4th season, *Brave Travel across History* (2003)

IT expert Sam (Chinese name Deshan Tang) in the fourth season was the most commonly acclaimed “ideal” participant. He possessed all the key criteria that the crew anticipated, including good looking, educated, sporty, heads-up and outspoken. Such a type of candidate won great favour from the crew. In the preproduction stage, Sam had already been selected to be the “protagonist” of the programme and was portrayed as a hero like figure in the titling sequence to impress the audience (see Figure 25). In the series, as the director expected, Sam’s three-year living experience in the United States made his behaviour and values appear very Westernized. The intelligence he displayed in the contest and his openness in presenting interviews led him to receive great coverage in the series and in public attention. Director Hong Huang comments that “an ideal participant needs to have game spirit like Sam who can fully engage into the contrived circumstance” (personal communication, June 2, 2006) and more importantly to be able to frankly express his real thoughts to the camera. Local producers complained about being short of such type of participants in China. Besides game spirit, openness is another important trait that Chinese participants were assumed to be generally lacking, in particular in the early seasons of *TGCFs*.

7.3.3 Concerns of Expression

In order to make *TGCFS* as interesting to watch as their Western counterparts, the *TGCFS* crew was in favour of recruiting educated participants who were good at verbal expression. During the one-to-one interviews with Chinese contestants after each run of group competition, the *TGCFS* director attempted to make them comment on each other to generate some conflicts. Nevertheless, according to produce Jian Zhao's observation,

The local participants generally could not openly present themselves and authentically express their real thoughts. Although a contestant may in fact dislike another contestant, he/she would not express his/her real thoughts in front of the camera, because he/she does not want to offend another contestant. This is possibly attributed to the profound influence of Confucianism on Chinese people (personal communication, August 9, 2006).

Zhao's comments address the complicity of Chinese participant's way of expression. Chinese people's behaviour and thinking has been strongly influenced by the working rules and ethical precepts of Confucianism, in terms of practicing moderation and maintaining harmony. Such Chinese cultural patterns are very different from Western culture which emphasizes individualism and encourages free expression of personal opinions. In *TGCFS*, in particular the earlier two seasons, Chinese participants appeared conservative during their interviews. They often attempted to avoid giving too harsh a critique of other participants and were concerned about maintaining a favourable public image. Xiangke Hou, a participant in the second season points out that

We had been told that the whole process would be recorded and presented on TV. In general, I did not mind being filmed. However, sometimes we would prefer to discuss competition strategies or whom we vote out next privately (personal communication, June 20, 2006).

Knocking teammates out of the game was ethically controversial, in particular in the second season with its socialistic overtones. Generally speaking, Chinese participants

often are very concerned about protecting their images on TV. They often care about how people would think of them, in particular their family, friends and colleagues. In the third season, participant Min Liu comments on her teammate Hong Yu as being hypocritical during the competition had a considerable impact on Hong Yu's real life. Min Liu says that

In the end of the competition, I apologized to Hong Yu for criticising her personality. Initially, I was not aware of the potential impact of my critiques on the viewers. Later I realized that in her real life she was harassed by my comments after the series aired. For several months, she avoided going back to work, because she could not face her colleagues who had watched the programme. She assumed that her colleagues might think she was a kind of person who was adept to scheming and good at putting on a show. I inflicted a far-reaching and long-lasting hurt on her (Personal communication, August 14, 2006).



Figure 26 Min Liu and Hong Yu making up and becoming friends again after the finale

Although among 12 girls in the third season, Min Liu seemed to be the contestant who displayed the most Westernized way of game playing, public criticism of her behaviour on the show more or less influenced her real life and challenged her once taken-for-granted game attitude. Figure 26 is an image taken after the finale. She apologized for her “inappropriate” comments on Hong Yu in the series. Although this behind-the-scene story was not included in the series, it is important for the understanding of Chinese participants' attitudes toward Western style game playing.

With an increase in the influence of Western culture on Chinese youth, young contestants in the later seasons evidently become more and more Westernized in their behaviour. Director Jie Wu observes that

There are differences between the contestants in the domestic and overseas reality programmes. However, unlike in the first two seasons, when contestants hesitated to express their concerns in the interviews in the recent few years, I feel that those Chinese contestants have become more and more Westernized, and more daring to express and to show behaviour (personal communication, July 25, 2006).

With more and more similar programmes made both in China and overseas becoming available in the domestic television market, both participants and audiences became familiar with the scenarios. Min Liu's way of game playing no longer seemed as "cutting edge" as in the third season. Since the third season, participants in the *TGCFs* series reflected a tendency of being more open in expressing themselves in front of the camera and more comfortable in sharing their real thoughts and emotions with other contestants.

7.4 Conclusion

The research on the aspect of casting and participants indicates that there was a clash between the agenda of programme makers and participants in the *TGCFs* series. Compared with the general patterns of Western participants displayed in *Survivor* and other popular reality programmes, Chinese participants seemed to have a more direct interest in the subject of survival experience, but more complex concerns in being the subject of factual entertainment. The process of adapting *Survivor*-style competition to the Chinese situation evidently involved a process of adaptation for both production crew and the participants. The examples of the earlier three seasons discussed in this chapter indicate that to a large extent, it was the participant that held a great deal of power within the production. Their collective refusal to operate in

ways expected in a competitive gameshow required crisis management by the production team. The contestants also managed to effectively subvert key aspects of the game rules in order to change the outcomes and procedures into ones that they would be more conformable with. The unique scenarios displayed in this studied production suggest that Chinese participants in the early years of reality programmes were effectively isolated in response to a commercial production agenda.

With the modification of the production approach to accommodate to rating success, the relationships between the two groups changed across the various seasons. Accompanied by those changes, the *TGCFs* format and its Western origin gradually become more alike in their programming. In a wider sense, these changes are all clearly shaped by broader social and economic changes within Chinese society. The presentation of Chinese youth in later *TGCFs* series seems more Westernized. The changes in participants can be argued as resulting from reality programme makers' deliberate efforts to teach participants/viewers how to operate within a reality gameshow.

In this Chinese case, the success of the unscripted production was rooted in creating appropriate expectations from participants and in finding suitable participants for television making. Those aspects are also further discussed in Chapter Ten which explores the unique function of pre-production training and specific game rules contributing to inspiring Chinese participant's game spirit. The following chapter focuses on a very unique case which highlights the contradictions and conflict between the political agenda and entertainment interests involved in the *TGCFs* production. Participants' responses to these complex circumstances provide a complement to the arguments presented in this chapter.

Chapter Eight: Entertainment Function and Political Purpose

An exploration of the birth of the *TGCF*S series in Chapter Five, a discussion about the foregrounding of a dramatic approach in Chapter Six and an examination of the cast agenda in Chapter Seven altogether indicate that *TGCF*S was an entertainment oriented programme. The series was specifically designed to satisfy an assumed audiences' needs for a programme which can be both as interesting as a scripted television drama and as informative as a travel documentary. The purpose of the pioneer team members was to overcome various obstacles (from the institution, the limited budget¹, the harsh filming environment, the limited techniques and non-cooperative participants) to exploit the new programming in order to win a greater local market share from international television channels, and to achieve their goal of making a popular quality programme. Nevertheless, in the production history of the *TGCF*S, the crew unexpectedly encountered a political task. The programming of the second season was arranged to take a political subject from Chinese revolutionary history by GDTV operators. The *TGCF*S series thereby became a vehicle for political propaganda.

As mentioned in Chapter Five, the GDTV operators' attitude towards the inaugural season dramatically shifted from initial disapproval to eventually one of great support. With the successful launching of the first season, the operators recognized the value of the series. In the second season, they started to explore its use value². GDTV was the leading provincial television broadcaster in the economically developed Guangdong province, geographically connected with Hong Kong and Macao and economically attached to a global market. The Party's concern for guiding public

¹ By the end of the filming, the production budget of ¥2 million was exhausted. Initially, the payment for production team members was budgeted in the production cost. However, in this case, GDTV operator sought other ways to cover these expenses.

² This issue is also discussed in Chapter Nine from the aspect of the branding. GDTV operators' concern of utilizing self-produced large-scale entertainment programme to advertise the provincial television station for the purpose of strengthening its competitiveness in the newly-emerged domestic satellite television market in early 2000s.

opinion had not been weakened in dealing with the “television special zone”. Instead as mentioned in section 2.2 of Chapter Two, the political function of GDTV, to some extent, has been reinforced in the post WTO era, because “mass media command a sensitive location in the Chinese Communist system. They are regarded as an important part of the ideological apparatus that is indispensable for legitimating the Party-state, indoctrinating the public and coordinating campaigns” (Chan, 2003, p.159). Being one of the most influential media in contemporary China, television was considered to be “the most powerful site for the construction of an official discourse on nationalism and the mobilization of patriotism” (Zhao and Guo 2005, p.531). Such aspects gained particular importance in the region of Guangdong where Western capitalistic values prevail in overseas media content.

In terms of a broad Chinese context, as the Party’s concerns and interests shifted from political struggle to economic development after the Cultural Revolution, the roles and functions of television undertook a dramatic transformation in the 1980s and 1990s. In a more open and reforming China, the “mouthpiece” function for Chinese television system was no longer played in a pedagogic and imperative way. Instead, it was inclined to be immersed in popular entertainment forms to reach a larger population and more subtly influence them. GDTV official’s idea of blending political content into popular reality programming was an innovative approach from a propaganda perspective.

Since the beginning of this century, the concept of “entertainment” (*yule*) became “a defining factor in the shaping of television programming in China” (Keane, 2002, p.80). Meanwhile, this concept has also gained acceptance within the echelons of political power as a means for propaganda. The boom of “Reality TV” in China in the new millennium signalled that Chinese entertainment programming had entered into a so-called “mass entertainment era³” (Yin, 2006, Xie & Tang, 2006, Xie & Chen,

³ With the prevalence of “Reality TV” on Chinese television screen, Chinese entertainment programming has entered into a new stage since the early 2000s. In the so-called “mass entertainment era”, entertainment

2007). In this new stage of development, the Party's interests and commercial interests were interweaved in the daily operation of the television station by the leader and many other officials. However, for most of the employees working in the front line of television production, their work in the post-WTO era was largely assessed by ratings performance. Therefore, for those production teams like the *TGCFS* crew whose work temporary centralized on the project, their concerns seemed simpler, in terms of maximizing the "life-span" of their programme in most cases.



Figure 27 The 2nd season: *Retracing the Long March Route* (2001)

This chapter uses the second season of *TGCFS*, namely *Retracing the Long March Route* (2001) (see Figure 27), as the main example to profile how the local production team attempted to take up the Western *Survivor* concept and struggled to combine it with political imperatives in order to create a localized reality format, for the purpose of both satisfying authorities of the television station and catering to audiences' viewing interests. This unique case embodies the complex dynamics that characterize the practice of blending elements of entertainment and politics. The discussion is focused on examining the role of entertainment in the cultural context of the format's development and articulating how Chinese programme makers try to account for major political considerations, in respect to using a market-orientated entertainment format to construct political discourse. In addition, participants' responses to being

programmes shared characteristics of grass-roots cultural traits, audience participation and interactivity.

part of this sometimes complicated process are also addressed to enhance an understanding of the cultural conflict which emerged in the production process within this political context.

8.1 *Survivor* meets the Long March

The year 2001 was a time of intensification in the production history of *TGCFS*. Encouraged by the successful debut of the inaugural season, the crew was passionate about going on to make a second season. As mentioned in Chapter Six, recognizing the format as a “show” rather than as a “documentary”, the production team prepared to give priority to entertainment in the programming to enhance the market appeal of the series. However, this newly emerged major annual production project of GDTV was selected by high-level officials of GDTV to be a part of the “mainstream melody” package devoted to political propaganda in the anniversary year of the Chinese Red Army’s Long March.

“Mainstream melody” (*Zhu Xuanlü*) is a Chinese term for official ideologies which are supported by the orientation of politics, economy, and the rule of national law (Louw, 2005). This term is mainly applied to film and television plays. Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, the political authorities have made great efforts to disseminate “appropriate” ideas, discourses and practices through the mass media, and to translate them into “a form that masses would understand and find entertaining” (Louw, 2005, p.203). The Long March (1934-1935) has been a popular subject of the “mainstream melody” fare due to its political significance for building an enduring public memory of the victories claimed for China’s revolution.

The year 2001 was both the 65th anniversary of the victory of the Long March and the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. As part of a political cultural tradition, mainstream media in Mainland China contributed various forms of media content to celebrate and commemorate this revolutionary history.

From the perspective of the Party, “[t]here was a need to reinforce the social memory of the CPC’s contribution to the founding of the People’s Republic, in order to boost society’s confidence in the Party during a period of economic transition” (Chu, 2002, p.51). However, the programming of the “mainstream melody” works also reflected another agenda. In last two decades, sharing a global pattern, entertainment had become the kernel of contemporary television culture as it penetrated into Chinese television programming. In order to accommodate to the changing social context, programme makers were not only seeking to adopt a pedagogic way of bringing public education in the “mainstream melody” works, because such an approach was no longer an effective means of disseminating official ideologies in a diverse cultural environment.

In the summer period of 2001, the national monopoly CCTV launched a high-profile television drama, *The Long March*, for the national audience to review revolutionary history and to re-ignite national spirits. As usual, the central television station took an orthodox account of history, but the programme was well scripted and well produced and attracted a large audience. The operators in GDTV attempted to take advantage of the market tested with the *TGCF* format to exploit a brand new televisual engagement with this national history by blending a hitchhiking task with the Long March path, and more adventurously to hybridize a *Survivor*-style competition with the subject of revolutionary history. However, such an “innovative” approach mainly represented the interests of the authorities of GDTV. In China, the principal directors and other officers of a television station are appointed by the Party and are thereby people responsible for operating this most influential of media with great care for the interests of the state.

As Vice president of GDTV and the Chief Production Supervisor, Sun Xüyang⁴

⁴ In 2000 when Xüyang Sun helped the team to initiate the production project for the inaugural season, he was an assistant of the Head of Social-Political Sector. In 2006 he had become the Vice-president of GDTV when he was interviewed in Guangdong Television Station. His assessment of the production and his review of the production history, to a large extent, was from an operator of the television station rather than as a member of the production team.

claims, “we wanted to look back at the historical events in that historic year” (personal communication, December 11, 2006) (This plural ‘we’ here refers to the authorities of GDTV rather than the production team). Therefore, coinciding with the anniversary year of the Long March, this revolutionary history was determined by the authorities to be the subject matter for the outdoor survival-based reality series, to become a part of the construction of official political discourse.

Interviews with the production supervisors and producers suggest that the popularity of the “mainstream melody” television dramas about the Chinese revolutionary history in the 1990s for GDTV operators brought optimistic prospects for a market and social response. The Long March subject in reality programming was assumed to be highly relevant to current public interest in the Long March history in its anniversary year. GDTV operators expected that this original production approach could allow the new season of *TGCFs* to achieve a ratings success and generate greater popular acclaim, and ultimately raise the profile of GDTV in the domestic television market. Nevertheless, this research reveals that many programme makers had different points of view in regards to the idea of turning the reality programme into a “mainstream melody” work, because this “popular” subject of the “mainstream melody” fare may not appeal to their targeted audience of urban young viewers, who often prefer to watch Japanese idol-drama, Korean melodrama and American soap opera (Yin, 2002).

The crew were determined to enhance the entertainment value of the programme, to sustain the “high” rating of 5% in Guangdong province achieved by the inaugural season⁵ shortly after its first run in the beginning of year 2001. Before the issue of working on the Long March topic emerged in GDTV, directors of the inaugural season had already developed a production proposal for the second season. The new

⁵ As mentioned in Chapter Two, Guangdong television audiences have been long attracted by Hong Kong commercial television. This research found that a programme which achieved 1% in the ratings in Guangdong television market can be viewed as satisfactory and therefore an average 5% achieved by the inaugural season of *TGCFs* was viewed as a major success in the local ratings competition.

production was planned to move to an overseas location, such as Japan or Canada to enhance audience appeal. In the meantime, gaining inspiration from CBS's *Survivor* and in consideration of its potential clash with Chinese cultural traditions, ideological frameworks and ethical values (see Chapter Three), the crew had also decided to selectively borrow some gamedoc elements of the *Survivor* formula (e.g. team competition, periodic elimination and tribal council). These were intended to generate more interesting stories, dramatic moments and emotional lows and peaks.

The crew had learnt from the inaugural season that merely documenting ordinary people's day-to-day travelling experiences lacked the dramatic tension that would maintain substantial public appeal. With the length of an episode being extended from about ten to twenty-five minutes⁶ in the second season, the demand for dramatic moments and interesting real-life stories inevitably increase. However, due to the unexpected interference of the authorities of the television station, the crew had to adapt to serve the interests of "politicians". The fact that the network was run by a politician rather than a business manager had been identified by many Chinese scholars and industry personnel as reasons for the network operators' general lack of marketing savvy and commercial management strategies (Zhang, 2002, Li & Zhang, 2002, and Hu, 2005).

In this season, a local cosmetics enterprise offered sponsorship of ¥ 3 million (about US\$ 375,000) to advertise its local brand of shampoo "*Dihuazhixiu*". Despite the fact that this amount of funding covered the station's investment in the filming, GDTV still acted as the major investor and thereby the decision-making about the programming in this season was strongly influenced by the political sensitivities of the authorities in GDTV. At that time, the commercial operation of the production was restricted to selling titling rights and commercial timeslots. In general, there was

⁶ 25-minute per episode was the standard length of the "special topic programme". In order to make the *TGCF* series a seasonal programme, it was necessary to schedule the series as an independent programme with set length in order to inspire a type of viewing engagement similar to narrative-based television genres such as drama and documentary.

no particular attention paid by the crew to integrating the desire of the commercial sponsor into the programming of the *TGCFS* format (This aspect is analyzed in Chapter Nine).

Up to this season, the production of *TGCFS* was still subject to the Social-Education Sector of GDTV which was traditionally responsible for accomplishing political tasks for the Party-state run television station (as explained in Chapter Six). As state-employed television professionals, following orders was the crew members' obligation and carrying out political propaganda was a part of their responsibilities. The multi-function nature of political unit, cultural instructor and business enterprise embodied by GDTV determined that the crew had to deal with a highly complex set of practices and dynamics from official discourse, ethical frameworks and commercial imperatives, while making a reality format which hybridized a controversial *Survivor* formula with a popular "mainstream melody" subject. In order to both fulfil their socio-political responsibilities and achieve their professional goals, the producers of *TGCFS* had to overcome obstacles created by the obvious conflicts and contradictions of politics and entertainment in a production with an assigned subject.

8.2 Cultural conflicts

Basically, the *TGCFS* format adhered to a *Survivor*-style challenge according to mainstream ethical and moral frameworks. As mentioned in Chapter Five, the crew's initial purpose in adding a team-contest into the overall survival challenge was to enhance personal interactions between the contestants and add more appealing content to the day-to-day travel, but not to encourage a Western style "cut-throat" competition. Evidently, the most intriguing ingredient, the big cash prize was missing in this season. The *TGCFS* production attempted to offer nothing but experiences of various kinds, including hardship, frustration, proud, friendship, culture and of course some degree of *Survivor* dramatic tension inevitably caused by the nature of the contest.

Chinese ordinary participants' attitudes towards the competitive elimination strategies have been addressed in Chapter Seven. *Retracing the Long March Route* emphasized promoting collectivistic values and constructing a sense of heroism.

In the Chinese context, the subject of Long March is associated with privileged concepts such as patriotism, national pride, and collectivism. The conflict between the ideological context of the Long March and the conception of an "elimination system" is mainly rooted in the contradiction between the concepts of collectivism and individualism in Chinese culture. The concept of the "Long March spirit" foregrounds collective goals and calls for being united to fight; whereas voting people out of the game encouraged participants to be more concerned with an individual's need to secure his/her own place in the game. No matter whether it occurred in China or in the West, the *Survivor*-style competition was often a target for social criticism due to its efficiency in overt and sustained competition for survival in the game. The device of the tribal council was deployed to encourage contestants into outwitting and back-stabbing each other for the good of the individual, an enterprise which appeared to clash with Chinese socialistic values and traditional morals.

In the production of *Retracing the Long March Route*, the contradictions between the political subject and the game-doc format, between political obligations and market objectives, and between propaganda content and attempts at entertainment value, in fact were more complicated and challenging than the production team initially imagined. Ironically, the first unexpected major difficulty encountered by the filming crew in experimenting with a *Survivor*-style competition mode in the second production was caused by some key crew members.

8.3 Political Apathy

The two-team competition and the device of voting one contestant out of the losing

team every week was included in the initial production proposal. In the early stages of the production, crew members had conflicting opinions on carrying out such game-style contests and staging eliminations through tribal councils in the context of a journey centred on a political theme. In the first month of filming, the crew was lead by a senior director of the Social-Education Section who had no intention to pushing boundaries while working on a production which functioned as a celebration of revolutionary history. He was hesitant to implement the “voting-off” strategy and in favour of adopting a propaganda style approach to the production to avoid taking any political risks. The early episodes therefore mainly covered the contestants travelling along the revolutionary route and visiting historical heritage sites. However, many participants soon lost interest in the day to day political nostalgia because their participation in the project was not motivated merely by a political commitment.

Among the 20 participants from aged 20 to 50 from all walks of life nationwide, only a few older participants were passionate about the Long March history. The majority of the participants had applied because of the opportunity for a self-challenge and outdoor adventure it involved. As 27-year-old participant Qingtong Zhu (a middle school sports teacher) admits,

Initially, I was apathetic about the subject of the Long March. Many contestants were like me. Our attitudes were to show our respect to the history, but not be passionate about it. I knew the history and after all it is a very important history for the country. However, its significance seems to have weakened, particularly for people living in the south (personal communication August 22, 2006).

During the first month of filming, three contestants withdrew from the production because of a mismatch between their expectations and subsequent experience.

In contemporary Chinese society, evidence suggests that people have become less and less interested in politics, in particular the younger generation who have become disinterested in revolutionary history (Sa & Yang 2006, McGormick & Liu 2003).

With the mushrooming of entertainment programmes on domestic television screens, the portion of the public sphere occupied by official public discourse had decreased (McGormick & Liu, 2003). Meanwhile, as McGormick and Liu argue, “many citizens now not only avoid producing official public discourse, but also minimize their exposure to it” (p.153).

Ordinary participants’ shared attitudes towards the political subject determined that the early propaganda emphasis not only resulted in low morale amongst the participants but also caused a drop in audience ratings⁷. A two-week gap between filming and broadcasting allowed the producers to quickly adjust their production approach to address these public responses. The Production Supervisor soon realized that foregrounding propaganda gestures over entertaining the anticipated viewer was inappropriate in a ratings-driven reality format and the original director was replaced one month later. In response to the conflict which emerged in the earlier stages of the production, the Chief Production Supervisor Xuyang Sun argues,

The programme had two storylines: the Long March history and competition. We wanted to give an equal stress to both aspects. However, in fact it was impossible to do so [...]. We were struggling at an earlier stage of the filming. So later, we made a change, in terms of not being too closely attached to the Long March. We instead advocated its spirit (personal communication December 11, 2006).

This view was based on a recognition that shared with a changing pattern of the contemporary “mainstream melody” works in which an ideological discourse reflected two distinctive patterns. One is an emphasis on nationalism and the other is the foregrounding of ethics, two strategies that have been widely adopted to balance the dynamics of entertainment and politics in the past two decades. The shift of a production approach to the political context signalled that the production of *TGCFS* had started to adopt market-oriented commercial practices in reality programme

⁷ GDTV’s audience rating is provided by CVSC-Sofres Media (CSM). It is the leading media research company in Mainland China. The data is gathered via people-meter panels and based on about 2000 samples in Guangdong province.

making. Facing dropping ratings, both the interests of the authorities and the production team in this case had to compromise with audience expectations and needs. In order to reverse the dropping ratings, the production team had to change their way of constructing a political discourse and find a new approach that could possibly ensure that all three sides (the authorities, the crew and the audience) were satisfied.

After the adjustment of its production approach, revolutionary history retreated from its central position to being a backdrop. Competition was now to be used as a vehicle to advocate the Long March “spirit”⁸. With the arrival of a new team leader, the initially planned periodic elimination system eventually came into operation. Although the contestants in the *Retracing the Long March Route* were generally against the idea of voting their team mates out of the game and some contestants even withdrew from the production in protest, the programme makers regarded this kind of conflict as the type of unanticipated situation expected in a non-script format production. For instance, during the filming a contestant “escaped” from the camp after a tribal council which caused serious panic among the production crew. Clode (2003) comments on the episode that “[b]reakthrough ratings were achieved when a popular contestant broke camp. After a televised police chase, the renegade was discovered in a nearby town catching up on lost meals” (p.64). The audience response testified that the dramatized representation of the “real” story and the unanticipated reaction caused by the conflict were more enjoyable to watch than the previous flag-waving march and the routinized activities for political worship. The outcome of the new approach was compared with that of the previous propaganda gesture by Production Supervisor Chun Yan⁹. He (2004) argues that,

At the beginning, the programme was endowed with too many political implications. Deemphasizing the game nature on purpose and lacking a well

⁸ Long March Spirit refers to a revolutionary heroic spirit of indomitable and invincible determination to succeed and the revolutionary collectivism of being united to fight through the portrayal of the heroic qualities of the contestants.

⁹ Mr. Chun Yan is the head of the Programme Center of Guangdong Satellite TV and served as the chief production supervisor from the third season to the sixth season of *TGCF*.

designed competition system made the early episodes seem dreary. It was not until the group competition started a month later that the reality programme began to present its appeal to the viewers (p.73).

Although entertainment had not entirely turned into a strategy of profit making in the second season, this production practice demonstrates that official audience ratings quickly became the dominant factor in determining the approach to content of the series, as long as the production did not cross the political bottom-line or breach the boundary of traditional ethical frameworks.

The foregrounding of the Long March spirit was the local programme makers' attempt to balance the conflict of interests that emerged in the production as they moved to a more competitive format. Compared with the history of the Long March, the concept of the Long March spirit as a national spirit contains more profound, extensive and updated meanings to modern day viewers. More importantly, the context of the outdoor sport had inherent relevancy to the core concept of the revolutionary spirit of *the Long March*, in terms of being determined to succeed by overcoming all kinds of hardships.

Zhao and Guo (2005) identified that “[s]ince 1990, nationalism has become the dominant ideological framework for Chinese media general – and for television in particular” (p.530). China’s economic boom raised the status of the nation in international society. In the late 1990s, the Chinese Party-state took opportunities to generate live broadcasts of several important national and international events¹⁰ to evoke national pride and mobilize patriotism among citizens. In this case, making politics more relevant to citizens' daily life has proved to be an optimal strategy for sustaining the stability of the political system and the legitimacy of the regime.

China also has a tradition of integrating the concepts of nation and family, politics and

¹⁰ By the end of 1990s, television had become an essential asset for Chinese households. Citizens were able to share the historical moments of the nation and the world via television live broadcasts of important political and cultural activities, such as Hong Kong and Macau’s return to Mainland China in 1997 and 1999 respectively, the grand military parade in the nation’s 50th anniversary in 1999 and China’s first attempt to apply for the holding rights for the 2000 Olympic Games in 1996.

ethics. Political policies and guidelines can be planted into people's mind through discourses on social ethics, moral norms and family values (Yin, 2002). In consideration of economic gains, the discourse of the "mainstream melody" tended to implement soft propaganda into dramatic programming, in terms of instilling "the official ideologies into mainstream ethics and morality and making them popularized and naturalized among the masses" (Louw, 2005, p.202). Nationalism/patriotism/collectivism plus the complexities of interpersonal interactions (e.g. romance, friendship and brotherhood) became an essential formula for prime time television serials (Yin, 2002).

Since taking a pedagogic stance towards political propaganda was verified as a failed approach, soft propaganda strategies as alternatives were applied to the filming and editing process. The political discourse in the programming of *Retracing the Long March Route* largely depended on the portrayal of hero-like ordinary participants demonstrating a Long March spirit through various survival challenges along the revolutionary path. Such a formula was familiar to Chinese viewers who grew up watching film and television texts about the revolutionary war. In response to the perceived conflicts of a *Survivor*-style contest and the political subject, Director Hui Han considers that

On a revolutionary path, there must be opportunities to present the virtuous aspects of human beings and the warmer side of society rather than a mere naked life-and-death fight (personal communication, August 14, 2006).

Han elicits the specific interest and expectations of the programme maker. Throughout its six-year production history, the foregrounding of the theme of "uplifting spirits" was an important pattern of the *TGCFS* format. Inspired by the Hong Kong aired *Airwave Boys'* heart-warming and inspiring portrayal of ordinary volunteers' real life experience, the conceptions of self-challenge and self-growth were emphasized in the programming of the *Survivor*-style format, which indicated local producers' preferred reading of the televisual text.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, being a factual-based production, the *TGCFS* series had to rely on “ordinary” contestants to carry forward the Long March spirit. Therefore, some of the techniques of conventional “mainstream melody” drama were applied to construct a political spectacular and to cater to the viewing habits of domestic television audiences. By giving an emphasis on “ordinary” contestants facing challenging survival tasks, the programming encouraged domestic audiences to relate to the inherent ideological aspects of the contemporary social context and audience/participants' everyday lives.

8.4 Portrayal of Role Models

“The use of role models to educate citizens was a common defining characteristic of Chinese governments in Chinese history” (Zhang, 2000, p.68). The dominant ideological themes and mainstream values were heavily promoted in the “mainstream melody” works through the portrayal of role models, ranging from “war heroes and revolutionary martyrs in military combat to model Party cadres and model workers in socialist construction” (Zhang, 2000, p. 68).

The subject matter of *TGCFS* is closely associated with outdoor sports which aim to challenge human limits. Such an association embedded in the reality programming led to the attempt to portray ordinary people in heroic terms. The production team preferred to call those ordinary volunteers “challengers” rather than “contestants”. This detail indicates local producers' preferred reading of the staged event as an opportunity for self-challenge and self-improvement rather than gambling.

Despite the cultural inadaptability of the *Survivor*-style competition, this season in fact provided an ideal platform for the crew to take their preferred *heroic* approach to extremes. One example is the titling sequence (see Figure 28) which was highly staged to guide the audience to view the programme in a way that both the

programme makers preferred and Chinese audience would feel familiar with. Segments that involved flag-waving, low-angle shots, slow-motion action, epic background music, as well as some magnificent natural phenomena or geographic landscapes, were adopted to establish the tone and manner of the episode.

Working on the subject of the Long March, local producers intended to encourage a sense of heroism, raise the audience's national pride and create a magnificent atmosphere for the media activity. Here a complex set of interests was interweaved into the programming. On the one hand, the crew's great concern for ratings seemed to isolate them from conventional propaganda practice which primarily served political education. However, on the other hand, the aesthetics tastes displayed in their televisual presentation suggested that their idea of an outdoor survival format was profoundly shaped by former "mainstream melody" dramas. The construction of the sequence conveys no sense of "ordinariness", but manipulates the audience's expectation of watching a "real life" version of a "mainstream melody" drama. The guest Production Consultant Hong Xi evaluates such an approach from a professional perspective. He says that,

The construction and cinematographic style of the title sequence was well thought out by the production team, in terms of the value guidance of reality shows. Reality TV aims to portray everyday heroes (personal communication, November 19, 2006).

Figure 28 Screen-clips of the titling sequence



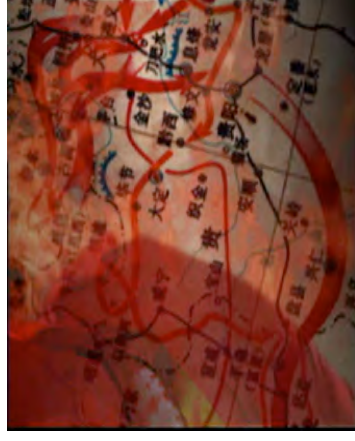
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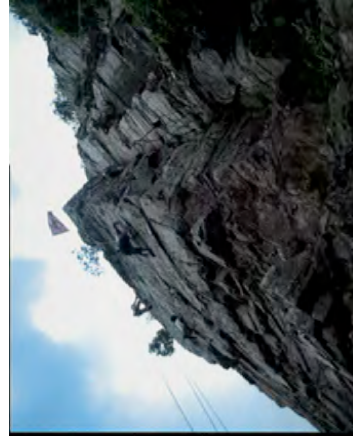
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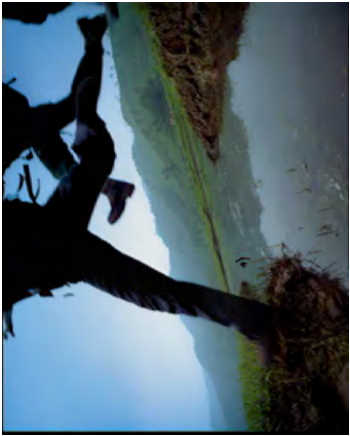
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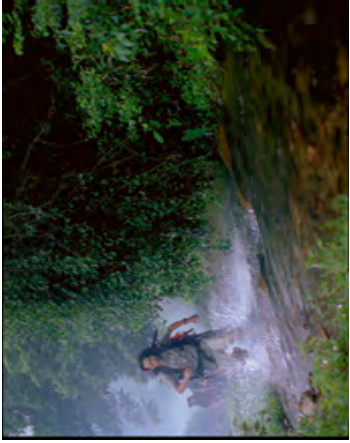
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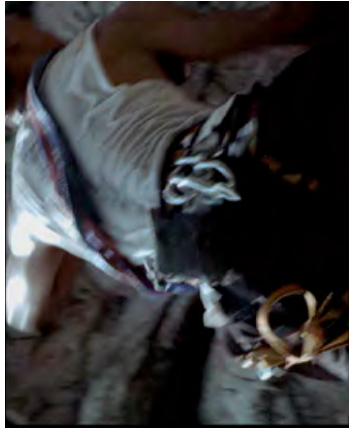
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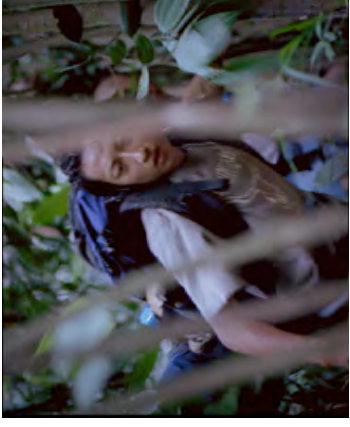
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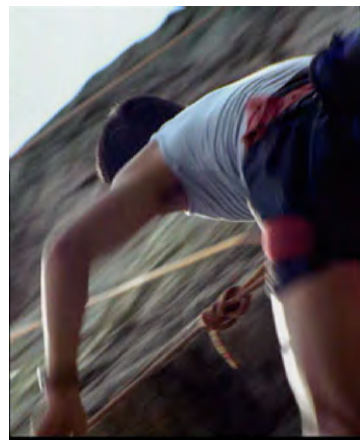
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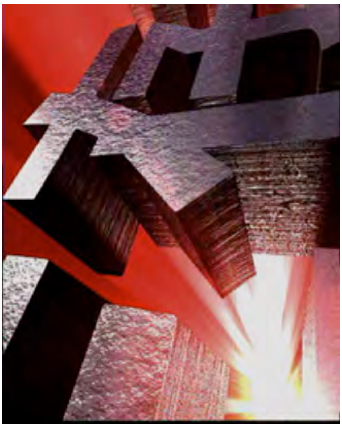
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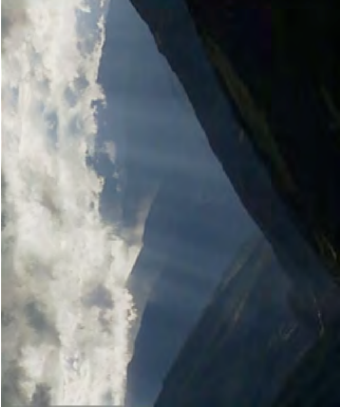
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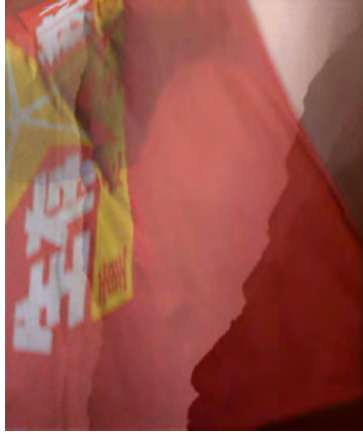
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Xi's opinion represents a predominant perception of the survival format in China. Over the six seasons, participants who demonstrated some heroic features, such as helping weaker members, sacrificing the self for the good of the team, and demonstrating a strong will power, often received greater attention and consequently became one of the more favourable and impressive participants in each season.



Figure 29 Retired soldier Xiangke Hou of the 2nd season



Figure 30 Outdoor sport expert, Fuqiang Zhang of the 3rd season

For instance, Xiangke Hou (see Figure 29) is a retired soldier from the special troop of the army. He effectively presented a respectable image of the soldier to viewers. During the Long March experience, he was always willing to help others, being righteous in a *Survivor* style living environment and impressive in his strong survival skills. Fuqiang Zhang (see Figure 30) is another good example of demonstrating heroic traits. This 42 year old contestant in the fourth season aptly demonstrated the “spirit of not giving up”. During a competition involving long distance hiking in a mountain area, he committed to completing the competition with a seriously hurt leg, keeping his promise of “not giving up” easily while facing difficulties. His behaviour and spirit moved other contestants to disregard the result of this competition, but to instead provide mental support for his commitment. Fuqiang Zhang responded to his attempt that

I just wanted to prove that I was capable of competing with young people [...]. I wanted to present the best part of a human being in an extreme situation and I did (personal communication, July 24, 2006).

Although Zhang eventually retreated from the filming shortly after the hiking competition, he was rewarded as the title of “Most Favourite Challenger” of the season in the finale and had many fans after this media experience.

In the production of the second season, the production’s requests for this kind of hero-like participants were urgent, because the claims for a Long March Spirit were something every participant needed to achieve. In order to portray some *hero*-like characters in the series, the Long March was staged as an “odyssey” and an epic approach was applied in postproduction. Nevertheless, in practice, the construction of a contemporary legend largely needed the participants’ contributions. The participant who volunteered to take up the survival challenge did not necessarily have a consistent interest in the challenge and a strong determination of overcoming difficulties. Participants’ intentions to escape from the survival challenge are addressed in several places in this thesis¹¹. During the first month of filming in the second season, the 20-member team had lost 6 members who retreated from the filming for various excuses (e.g. protest, health, work etc.). Based on this situation, the crew realized that in order to make these everyday people display some human qualities that could be emulated by the viewer, the crew had to exercise forms of “manipulation”.

8.5 Emotionalized Narrative

As mentioned in Chapter Six, the key to portraying some “challengers” as hero-like was rooted in an emphasis on the hardship of the survival challenge. As Chief Director Hui Han claimed,

¹¹ Some relevant discussions are based on the example of using an informal tone to lightly criticize the laziness of the participants in the inaugural season in Chapter Six and the case of some young contestants attempting to “legally” retreat from the filming by make themselves sick in the sixth season, as discussed in Chapter Nine.

Hardship is the central idea of the staged event which can arouse participants' spirit in overcoming the difficulties and benefits the portrayal of some memorable and positive characters (personal communication, August 14, 2006).

Such a perception was particularly obvious in the earlier two seasons that had no financial prize involved. As discussed in Chapter Six, in this localized format hardship was treated as a resource for emotions, and the suffering of the challenger was utilized to mobilize the audience's emotional engagement. The second season demonstrated the kind of "melodramatic" emotional approach this entailed.

"Racing to the Luding Bridge" was a mythic event of the Long March and was also one of the most challenging tasks in the *Retracing the Long March Route* (see Figure 31). Two teams were set to compete for a rapid march and required to complete a 120-kilometre route into the mountain area within fifty hours. Taking advantage of using voice over, the narrative addressed how these team members helped each other to complete the journey by promoting a collective spirit. Although these Chinese contestants had experienced conflict and friction during the journey, like contestants on the Western *Survivor*, the given task was presented as an opportunity for the team members to bond tightly to achieve a collective goal by helping each other overcome their personal limits.

The whole procedure of the team members completing the physically demanding task and approaching the finishing point was highlighted by specific editing strategies. Melodramatic techniques were used to enhance viewers' emotional engagement with the dramatic nature of the contestants' victory. Emotional background music, slow motion cinematography, close ups of people bursting into tears, hugging each other and holding hands were used to build an emotional climax into the composition of those moments when one team was about to reach the finishing point alongside the Luding Bridge.



1 The departure of a team



2 The marching route



3 Marching overnight



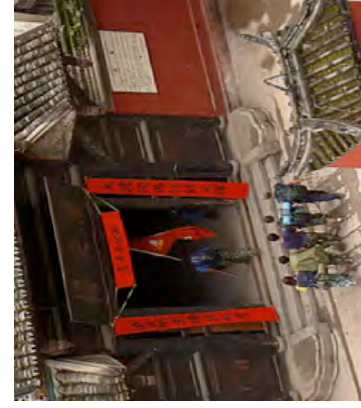
4 A member hurt his leg



5 Approaching the destiny after two days marching



6 team members all emotional collapsed



7 arrived finishing point



8 Marching across the Luding bridge

Figure 31 Screen-clips of the episode of "racing to the Luding Bridge"

In this example, the spirit of teamwork and of self-challenge presented by ordinary volunteers echoed the Long March spirit demonstrated by the original Red Army soldiers. By watching contemporary ordinary people carrying out a historical task, audiences could make better sense of how difficult it was for their ancestors to march in harsh circumstances, with an enemy pursuing them, with a lack of food. In this historical re-enactment, political ideology made connection to the daily life of the citizen through the affirmation of ethical and moral frameworks and role models (Yin, 2002). The strategy of emotionalizing the marching experience and ethicizing the political ideology were applied to evoke viewers' empathy with the ordinary people's unique encounter with revolutionary history and thereby instil political ideology in the viewer's mind through an appeal to their emotions.

Similar kinds of approaches can also be found in other seasons with non-political subjects, because the spirit of teamwork and self-challenge matched public perceptions of both outdoor sports and Chinese mainstream values. In order to construct a sense of heroism and make high concepts seem natural to the viewer, the challengers' persistence in overcoming hardship and difficulties were largely highlighted in the filming and the televisual text of the *TGCF* series. This kind of approach dramatized the construction of the real life experience; meanwhile, it also avoided the potential for social criticism by presenting uplifting content that highlighted human virtues.

8.6 Edutainment Approach

“Racing to the Luding Bridge” represents a typical way of designing tasks for group competition which reflects political educational values. In this localized game-doc format, the Chinese programme makers aimed to provide a *Yujiao yule* viewing experience (that is to combine education with entertainment) through travelling to cultural exotic locations. The content of the *Retracing the Long March Route* has an emphasis on the cultural encounter of the Long March route: conducting the competition along a historical path and associating the games and tasks with the Long

March theme. Narration was used to introduce the history of the Long March and inform viewers of the local culture and geographic knowledge.

In the earlier episodes, viewers mainly witnessed the participants visiting historical sites, meeting people who experienced the Long March and providing personal comments and reflections on the history and cultural experience. This plain approach to the history not only failed to draw audience attention, but also bored the participants. After an adjustment of the production approach from propaganda-driven to entertainment-oriented, the saga of modern day participants encountering revolutionary history became more vivid and diversified through enacting key events of the Long March (e.g. racing to the Luding Bridge, climbing snow capped mountains and crossing the great grassland) and mimicking the recorded daily routine of the Red Army (e.g. knitting straw shoes, ferrying across a river by old-style skin raft and making five-star flags)

Through the participants' engagement with the historical context, the ideological discourse of the New Long March experience could be more effectively instilled into the mind of the participant as well as that of the audience. An “edutainment” approach to the political history reflected the local producers' efforts to maximize entertainment values, meanwhile ensuring the political propaganda dimension of the production. Alternatively, an infotainment approach was more widely integrated into the programming of the *TGCFs* format in the production history to enhance the cultural weigh of the content¹².

8.7 Ritualized Ceremony

After participants' carrying out a number of recorded exploits of the Red Army along the Long March path, a big celebration could be anticipated at the end of the journey.

¹² The analysis on the infotainment approach is presented in Chapter Five which is highly relevant to the discussion here. What made the 2nd season differ from the other five completed seasons in the aspect of its infotainment approach is its particular interests to process political education.

In this season, a ritual for the departure of participants and a live broadcast finale were both carefully staged. The presentation of the departure ritual in the *Retracing the Long March Route* made an interesting contrast to its Western counterpart. In the case of *Survivor*, Western contestants often express their determination to win the games and their ambition to take the promised reward home: the same segment in the Chinese series puts a very different emphasis on such self-expression. A volunteer contestant representing a group of twenty volunteers made a solemn vow of their determination to complete the Long March and carry out its spirit. This is another classic scenario from many conventional “mainstream melody” film and television plays about The Long March.

In an echo of the departure, a large-scale celebration of the grand victory of the challenge was set in the terminal of the Long March route at Huining country in the Gansu Province (see Figure 32). The finale was presented as a festival-style event. Local government and residents enacted the historical traditional ceremony for welcoming the Red Army. Thousands of local residents gathered on the main street to witness and welcome the eight contestants’ arrival at the terminal. Local musicians, dancers and performers took part in a parade along the main street. A live broadcast conveyed the atmosphere of the celebration to the viewer. The interviews with the contestants also emphasized the value of the experience which brought them benefits on a mental and moral level. As mentioned in Chapter Six, a happy ending was considered to be one of the most important aspect of the portrayal of those everyday “heroes”.



1 Enacting the traditional ceremony for celebrating the success of the march



2 Local people gathering in town to witness the arrival of eight participants



3 Two GDTV hosts reporting the event on location



4 Officers in local government greeting participants



5 Inserting the sequence shot at each participant's home



6 Creating the name of the programme to finish the live broadcast

Figure 32 Screen clips from the grand finale of the 2nd season

8.8 Long March “hands-on history” strand

To a certain extent, *Retracing the Long March Route* can be viewed as a cultural experiment in using the entertainment-oriented television format to keep the “politically appropriate” vision of the past alive. It was indeed challenging for the GDTV producer to adapt a format and find an approach that could cater to the unique viewing tastes and habits of Chinese audiences, satisfy the authorities and also achieve their professional goals. They struggled to balance their complex roles in order to produce a hybrid format programme that was not only politically beneficial and socially informative, but also culturally rich and visually entertaining. Drawing on their previous experience in making travel-based “special topic programmes”, the *TGCFs* crew was sophisticated in making the hitchhiking experience rich in cultural context/value. However, their commitment to exploring the entertainment values of the *Survivor*-style format was restricted by the political purpose of the subject, ethical frameworks of censorship, the production capacity of the institution and the knowledge of commercial operations. Compared with many popular Western commercial reality programmes, such as CBS’s *Survivor*, this Chinese pioneer reality production still seemed amateurish in the aspect of manipulating audiences’ viewing interests through well planned programming and polished narrative skills. Although at that time the production crew had not acquired the knack of making this kind of reality programme (this aspect is specifically discussed in Chapter Ten), the *Retracing the Long March Route* set up a prototype for a “hands-on history” strand.



Figure 33 *My Long March*



Figure 34 *Rekindling Long March Route*

During the 70th anniversary of the victory of the Long March, retracing the revolutionary historical path became a popular cultural ritual to commemorate the Communist forefathers' historical expedition. Two television productions, *My Long March* (*Wo de changzheng*)¹³ (CCTV, 2006) (see Figure 33) and *Rekindling Long March Route* (*Xinghuo changzheng lu*)¹⁴ (Shanghai TV, 2006) (see Figure 34), about ordinary people retracing the Long March received a high public profile. Both productions discarded the game format, but maintained an infotainment approach. Aiming to produce an “appropriate” commemorative product, both programmes explicitly carried political messages and enhanced educational aspects. It seems that the developing trend of “retracing the Long March route” formula has returned to a conventional propaganda model by taking on the idea of recording ordinary people recounting history instead of the GDTV team’s approach of an entertainment-targeted reality format. In the last decade, the second season, *Retracing the Long March Route* also appears to be the most frequently re-broadcast series among the six finished seasons of *TGCFs* by domestic and overseas Chinese-language channels. It seems that in the battle between the Party-state control and viewer autonomy in the Chinese media context, the former still has a strong social basis and dominant power.

¹³ China Central TV’s famous talkshow host Yongyuan Cui produced a series called *My Long March*. It documents twenty-six ordinary people who trace the route of the Long March.

¹⁴ In the summer of 2006 Shanghai TV, the largest provincial-level television station produced *Rekindling Long March Route* which recorded a group of university students challenging the Long March.

The popularity of retracing the historical route in contemporary Chinese society suggests that this kind of activity links to a wider social need for reviving the national spirit through the re-enactment of historical activity. More recently, this trend was further reinforced. For example, compared to about 3000 applications for participating in GDTV's *Retracing the Long March Route* in 2001, CCTV's *My Long March* made in 2006 attracted more than 10,000 volunteers from around the world who were willing to take on the challenge. The political overtones in the two productions made by the two influential state-run Chinese television stations indicate that the "Reality TV" concept of presenting "ordinary people's extraordinary life" has been integrated into propaganda-oriented television programming.

The proliferation of this type of political reality format proved that entertainment orientation is an efficient marketing strategy for processing the socialization of the political propaganda for the purpose of achieving better communication effects. This phenomenon echoes Zhong's (2001) argument that

While commercial interests are profoundly involved in Chinese television, the involvement does not necessarily lead to political and cultural liberalization or sabotage propaganda. On the contrary, there is evidence showing that business and Party interests can coexist and benefit each other (p.168).

This is the justification for the reform approach of the Party over the last decade, in terms of attempting to adhere to Party lines while allowing the space for cultural enfranchisement in highly controlled forms of liberalization. The tension in achieving such a harmonious outcome is in finding the common interest. Like Chinese commercial cinema taking up "mainstream melody" subjects to expand its market place in the last two decades, "mainstream melody" programme makers have also been aware of the great possibility of achieving a profound social impact through the virtues of popular culture forms (Yin, 2002)

In fact in 2006 the team continuously exercised crossing the reality production with serious subjects such as military and religion. In 2006, the *TGCFS* crew carried forward its project of exploring new hybrid formats. They proposed to extend the subject of survival challenge from outdoor adventure to military manoeuvres in a planned seventh season of *TGCFS*, called *Suo xiang wu di*¹⁵ and also to integrate religious content into another outdoor survival challenge-based production, namely *Go to the West*¹⁶. The former project was initiated by a Shenzhen-based private-run media company and the latter production plan was originally created by the Party-state run Chinese National Defense Television Center. Both production programming attempted to integrate serious subjects into an entertainment-oriented reality format in a way which would be politically safe and potentially financially rewarding. In an increasingly commercialized domestic television market, local producers often preferred to promote these kinds of hybrid formats as “infotainment” programmes to attract their viewers.

According to the production proposal of the planned seventh season, this thirty-episode large scale production was designed to present the professional quality of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) through some kind of information-based war game. The proposal also clearly noted that the launch of this programme was expected to create some positive effects to propel the some ideological education carried out for the benefit of the army.

With the expansion of the entertainment territory from cultural and social subjects to political and religious subjects it seems that the development of Chinese television media was moving towards a great liberalization. However, this research found, by a close examination of the behind-the-scenes production agenda, that local producers faced various pressures and challenges in dealing with those politically sensitive subjects. For instance, in the preproduction of the planned seventh season of *TGCFS*,

¹⁵ This Chinese phrase is often used to describe an army being all-conquering.

¹⁶ The broadcasting rights of the *Retracing the Long March Route* was sold to Tokyo Chinese TV Station in 2002, to Hong Kong ATV in 2002 and to the provincial television station Hunan TV’s Public Channel in 2003. In 2006, China’s first Reality TV channel also aired the series.

the GDTV crew complained about the difficulties of catching soldiers “being themselves” in front of the camera during their 'making of' featurette.

In order to sustain the established public image of soldiery, all the participants from the army were very self-conscious of their behaviour and comments, following a standardized ritual and manner in front of the camera. Likewise, in the production of the *Go To the West*, the programme makers also needed to respect Buddhist monks' specific manner and to protect their public image. Moreover, in the contemporary socio-political environment, television producers were required to present the Buddhist subject in a cultural rather than a religious context in order to minimize any suspicions that they were promoting religion through mainstream media. It can be said that power relationships between politics and entertainment in China involve a set of negotiations, compromises and collaborations in an increasingly ratings-driven media environment.

8.9 Conclusion

This production research found that in the post-WTO era when the non-profit-making public institution is in the process of being transformed into a corporate-like broadcaster, the influence of politics on the mainstream entertainment programming is nonetheless still pervasive. In order to achieve better communicative effects among the wider population, propaganda officials are in favour of utilizing popular cultural formats to expand the social influence of the mainstream ideology and make the political discourse seem more natural to Chinese citizens.

The chapter highlighted the difficulties created by the competing needs of achieving commercial success in a domestic television market, while also making a contribution to the government's political goal of pursuing social harmony through “healthy” media products. On one hand, the change of media landscape that took place in the reform era did not affect the essential role of television media in China as a tool of

political propaganda. However, on the other hand, in an increasingly ratings-driven media environment, political propaganda has to adopt some “soft” tactics to penetrate into television programme making, to reach wider audience and to effectively produce a desired effect. As Zhao & Guo (2005) points out,

This new regime of ideological domination is based on a compromise between the Party state and the population, and a collusion between the political and media elites, where the state tolerates ideological and moral relaxation in exchange for the population’s retreat from making political demands. The media secures political patronage and commercial success while the population gets entertainment and a sense of cultural enfranchisement (pp. 523-524).

The production agenda of the second season examined in this chapter provided a profile of how local documentary programme makers accommodated to a complex production environment where different interests were confronting, negotiating and compromising with each other in order to address the local audience’s viewing interests. Due to the unique roles played by the local producers and the changing production environment in the reform era, entertainment was treated as the means to making a ratings friendly programme, but not a pure commercial strategy of making profits. It is more accurate to say that their exploration of entertainment values over the first two seasons was motivated by a desire to achieve their professional ambitions, in terms of making an innovative television programme format to write Chinese television history.

Working on a marketing oriented production with a political subject was indeed highly challenging for professionals in a Party-run and state-owned institution. Their socio-political responsibilities, aesthetic ambitions and marketing pressures were all interwoven in the making of the *TGCFs* format and profoundly influenced their decision making on the programme. After the production crew discharged their political responsibility of carrying out a propagandist role in the third season, they were eventually allowed to concentrate on experimenting with marketing practices

and exploring more commercial values in the following *TGCFS* season. The next chapter examines the commercial practice applied to the programming of the *TGCFS* format and the impact of the institutional environment on the crew's implementation of commercialization in their entertainment programming.

Chapter Nine: Commercial Operation and Institutional Environment

The examples discussed in the previous chapters indicate that entertainment was always the foremost interest of the *TGCFs* crew despite any programming deals involving a political or non-political subject. An emphasis on the entertainment value of the show and the foregrounding of audience interest would inevitably lead these local reality programme makers to pursue a narrow commercialist agenda. Such a pattern shares some similarities with Western commercial productions, which to a large extent was a result of the changing socio-economic environment that the Chinese television makers were engaging with in the past two decades.

In the 1990s, the foregrounding of entertainment values in the creation of cultural products signalled the emergence of a consumer culture in China. As in the West, “commercial interests are profoundly involved in Chinese television” (Zhong, 2001, p.168). Over the past two decades, entertainment programme makers have been positioned at the forefront of ratings competition, to spur sales of advertisements and to attract commercial sponsors. As a result, entertainment programmes have been among the most adventurous exercises in introducing commercial practices into programming management in China. In order to pursue higher ratings and yield economic gains, local entertainment programme makers often imitate foreign popular television formats and integrate Western commercial practices into their productions.

Since television is still considered largely a news media representing the voice of the Party-state, it has been argued that in terms of reform progress, Chinese television has been the most conservative, closed and slowest to adapt among all other media industries in China (Wang, 2003). With the deepening of commercialization in Chinese television media, the old institutional structures and management models became more and more problematic to those productions that attempted to follow a marketing logic.

The conflict between programme makers' increasing demands to apply commercial operations to their production and television stations' binary traits of being both public institutions and business enterprises was a widely discussed topic among both people in the industry and academia in the past decade (Li & Zhang 2002, Hu 2005, Li & Wu, 2006 & Li, 2006).



Figure 35 The 3rd season: *Heroines cross Heaven Pass* (2002)

After the *TGCFS* production crew unloaded their political burden of carrying out a propagandist role after the completion of the second season of *Retracing the Long March Route* (2001), they were eventually allowed to concentrate on exercising commercial practices and exploring marketing values for the programme. In the third season, titled *Heroines cross Heaven Pass* (2002) (see Figure 35), the *TGCFS* format not only completed its transformation from a propaganda device to a commercial product, but it also settled into a fixed format as a gamedoc. Such a dramatic shift of the production approach in this studied case can be attributed to the changing Chinese media environment coming into the new millennium.

In the primary stage of government initiated media reform, the industrialization of the old television system was unable to keep up with the pace of commercialization in

television production. Although the crew's ambition to conquer the local market with a new television format was clearly demonstrated in the inaugural season, it was not until the third season that a commercial operation was eventually applied to the production of the *TGCFS* format. However, during this transition, this market-oriented large-scale local production in fact never became fully profit-driven. Instead, it operated with a complex consideration of balancing a social benefit and an economic imperative. The institutional system has been argued as the major obstacle for these developments within the Chinese television industry (Li, 2006).

Based on a close look at the commercial agenda of the third season, this chapter attempts to articulate the impact of this institutional environment on the crew's marketing operation of a ratings-targeted production. Some key issues that emerged in the commercial practices of the *TGCFC* format are addressed in the aspects of publicity, programming and distribution, while the relevant behind-the-scenes considerations are explored to provide an in-depth understanding of the problems and difficulties that the local Chinese crew encountered in this period of their production history. The producers' interactions with the audience and the role of ratings in the entertainment programming are also examined in the context of broader institutional structures.

9.1 The Dominance of Advertising Revenue

Over the past two decades, the media industries developed into mainstay industries in China (Zhang, 2005). The growth of national economics led television to become a key growth engine of the new national economy. The industrialization of the television system propelled the marketing orientation of television production, and the crucial function of advertisements became central to revenue building, resulting in a foregrounding of audience ratings in programme assessments.

Globally speaking, as Kilborn has said, "in an increasingly competitive media

environment the battle for ratings is more intense than at any point in television history” (2003, p.8). Television is no longer the dominant medium it was in the later 20th century. Although China has lagged behind, television broadcasters have been facing the same pattern of increasing competitiveness from other television channels and from other forms of the media.

The Party decided to introduce a competitive self-funding structure into the domestic state subsidized television system from 1995 and aimed at achieving this goal in 2001 (Liu, 2006, p.9). “In order to gain and protect their own economic interests, various media organizations have engaged in severe competition for advertising” (Chan & Chan, 1998, p.650). Television broadcasters launched more television channels to increase their sales of advertising in the later 1990s.

In the beginning of the new century, television advertisements had become the major economic source for Chinese television stations, contributing more than 90% of their overall annual revenue (Weber, 2002, p.60). However, the growth of the domestic television audience nearly reached its limit. In 2002, it was reported that 1.115 billion people in China had access to television sets which meant there was no more space to enlarge the audience size. Theoretically, the rise of ratings in one channel means a drop of ratings in other channels (Xie & Dang, 2005). As a result, in a supply-driven television market, regional media houses had to break regional boundaries to win nationwide audience’s attention, in order to compete for more advertising revenue.

Shortly after China’s entry into the WTO, GDTV programme makers working in the frontline became more anxious about accommodating to the new market in the Chinese television “special zone”. The *TGCFS* crew not only needed to compete for ratings with overseas commercial channels, but also struggled to compete for the attention of their targeted and advertiser-desired urban young population in competition with the internet, DVDs or other more “updated” forms of entertainment. Facing these circumstances, the *TGCFS* team was forced to take a marketing campaign into serious consideration in order to ensure the longer term survival of

their large scale production project. The foregrounding of the commercial attributes in the production of the third season was the crew's direct response to this ratings pressure.

9.2 Commercialist Approach

GDTV makers generally agreed that being a pioneer reality programme in the domestic television market was an important reason for the successful launch of the inaugural season of the *TGCFS* in 2000. The *TGCFS* inspired many other Chinese television makers to produce a similar programme format. As in the West, where rivals tended to help exhaust new formats, the phenomenon of the homogeneity of these television outputs largely shortened the lifecycle of newly-emerged television formats. In 2001, various outdoor survival format programmes started to emerge on national to city-level television channels nationwide. Therefore, how to maintain a long-term public interests in *TGCFS* was a big challenge for the crew. A reporter from *Guangdong Television Weekly*¹ Weibin Hu reveals that

The influence of the first season was significant. In contrast, that of the second season was limited. Therefore, television stations faced certain pressure for managing the production of the third season (personal communication, August 28, 2006).

After the second season, the crew became an independent production team which was subjected to the Programme Center of the Guangdong Satellite Channel². The production cost of the *TGCFS* series was increased from original ¥1.7 million (US\$ 212,500) to ¥4.5 million (US\$ 562,500) in the third season (Appendix 4). To GDTV,

¹ Guangdong Television Weekly is a newspaper owned by GDTV which is distributed in Guangdong province. Every year, Guangdong Television Weekly would send a reporter to report the filming on site. To a large extent, this correspondent often acted as a publicist for the production crew to write official press releases for other local newspapers to publish.

² In 2002, the management system of GDTV was changed from a sector-based to channel-based structure. In the first two seasons the crew members of the *TGCFS* belonged to the Social-Education Sector which and the Chief Editorial Office would arrange its broadcast on GDTV's three channels for general interests (including GDTV Satellite Channel, the Pearl River Channel and the Public Channel). The implementation of a channel-based management model aimed to develop a competition structure among the channels and allowed each channel to be more flexible in their programming and management practices.

the *TGCFS* became a name brand³ big-budget seasonal programme.

Since *Survivor*-style programmes were no longer a novelty television format in the domestic television market, merely to advance the packaging and polish filming skills would not be enough to maintain a substantial public appeal. With increased pressure regarding ratings and improved perceptions of commercialization, the producers of *TGCFS* realized the importance of advertising the programme and enhancing the popularity of the format by utilizing commercial strategies to create a high media profile. Director Hong Huang explains that

This programme had become a name brand programme which received more and more public awareness. If we did not consider the selling points of the series, it would be very difficult to create a brand influence (personal communication, June 1, 2006).

Marketing terms such as “selling points” and “brand influence” have become familiar to those Chinese television professionals interviewed. Although they may not master marketing skills in practice, a commercial consciousness had become deeply implanted into their minds. The commercial attributes of the third season are displayed clearly in its programming. In order to capture the audience’s attention and generate a higher profile, aspects such as “huge cash prize”, “exotic overseas scenery” and “urban beauties” were designed as selling points for the outdoor-survival format. .

The crew continued to apply *Survivor*-style game playing and the device of the tribal council to the programming of the third season. In the meantime, they further introduced the element of a “substantive cash prize” into the game playing and staged a *Survivor*-style scenario of living as a tribe in a primeval environment on Tianing Island in Saipan. Apart from the purpose of encouraging a competition spirit among the Chinese contestants, the establishment of a cash reward of up to ¥ 200,000 (US\$

³ *TGCFS* was awarded one of the “Ten Chinese Reputable TV programmes” in 2002 by the Chinese Television Artists Association in 2002.

25,000) was a designed to stimulate public interest (¥ 200,000 was the maximum amount for a cash prize allowed to be given out in a contest-based programme in China). In the early 2000s, there had been no other domestically-produced entertainment programmes giving out such a large amount, a fact that gave the programme a lot of publicity. For instance, the winner in Guizhou TV's *Survival Camp in Canyon* was rewarded with ¥ 100,000 (US\$ 12,500) while *Into Shangri-La* promised a more Chinese style prize of assisting the winner to realize a dream, "likely to take the form of college tuition, starting a private business, or foreign travel" (Lusby, 2001).

In order to maximize the entertainment values of the show, they also took the filming to overseas locations to catch up with the social trend of travelling overseas. Producers expected that the exotic natural environment in Saipan and New Zealand (see Figure 36), plus the unique cultural experience of tracing the Yellow River (see Figure 37), would enhance audience appeal and particularly attract their desired urban middle-class audiences.



Figure 36 Hiking along the Yellow River



Figure 37 Shearing a sheep in New Zealand

As mentioned in Chapter Seven, in the early 2000s, the subject of travelling to some geographical and cultural exotic locations was assumed to be appealing to everyday Chinese, in particular to the middle-class stratum. However, in considering the relatively large production scale and the potential risks of balancing the big budget in making travel-based programmes, very few productions provided opportunities for

ordinary people to travel around the nation and go overseas. Instead, most of the local productions chose to film in an isolated location (e.g. *Survival Camp in Canyon* in a canyon in Guizhou Province) or travel within one region (*Into Shangri-La* in Yunnan province).

Presenting an impressive lineup of twelve young urban fashionable single female contestants was another important marketing strategy, one derived from the conception of Hong Kong beauty contests. Working in the frontline of entertainment programming in China, the *TGCFS* crew continuously sought to push boundaries. Although exposing sexuality could not a part of the production agenda due to media censorship, creating a controversial profile by utilizing a female gender appeal in their marketing plan could stimulate public curiosity. Nevertheless, the directors' desire was unable to be fully transmitted into the production.

In the commercialization of television media, Party-state run broadcasters still struggled to balance a commercial interest with the sober tone considered appropriate for state-run media. In this case, the authorities of GDTV were concerned that their "self-produced" programme would become a target for social criticism for catering to "the lowest common denominator". As a result, in the preproduction stage, the term "beauty" in the title of the third seasons was required to be replaced by "heroine", to reduce the potential for misinterpretation of the subject to the public and attracting the concerns of media censors⁴.

The production team's exercises in the commercialization of the production not only revealed conflicts of interest with the operators of their host institution, but also exposed their lack of sophisticated marketing skills. The *TGCFS* crew was a highly production-focused team made up of a group of experienced directors, producers, camera operators and editors who took full responsibility for the rating performance

⁴ Socialistic ideologies heavily promote the idea of appreciating inner beauty and were against any tendency toward worshipping external beauty. Therefore, a 'beauty contest' is a slippery conception in the Chinese mainstream media. Producers often attempted to attach to a beauty contest some cultural and social significance to fit in with the context of these socialistic ideologies.

of the programme. However, none of them had expertise in a marketing domain. For this season, commercial elements seemed to be discursively packaged to maximize the potential of achieving a ratings success. A commercial operation of the television programming was new to these television makers working in the television station at that time, and they had to learn on the job.

This production research found that the crew's decision making was not based on scientific research on their viewing audience and target markets. The development of the production project often relied instead on a handful of key crew members' brainstorming of ideas and their self-assessment of the feasibility and potential of the market appeal of a proposed production plan. As a direct result, the outcome of their exercise in commercial operation was unable to bring them the phenomenal marketing success that they had anticipated.

9.3 The Importance of the Local Market

The competition for ratings is ultimately the competition for a specific viewing population. Programme makers wanted to attract viewers and sell them to advertisers. As a provincial-level television station, GDTV operates on a variant of a marketing strategy which involves both cultural and economic considerations. As Production Supervisor Chun Yan stresses,

A clear strategic consideration of competing for audiences is primarily achieved through striving fully for the viewer in Guangdong province and then the Cantonese-speaking area. We are also quite concerned about the television audience in the south of China (personal communication, August 23, 2006).

Giving priority to the local market indicates the important role of local advertising revenues in GDTV's revenue building, a result of the unique structure of the Chinese television market and the geographical pattern of Chinese economic development.

Territorial autonomy is a unique characteristic of the Chinese television market. Except for national broadcaster CCTV, television stations in China have been operated according to regional division⁸. Keane (2003) argued that

Prior to 2001, and in contrast to privately owned and operated media systems in capitalist mixed economies, China's nationalized broadcasters were not consolidated into competitive networks, but rather operated according to geographically determined logistics premised on the ideal of ensuring that information and propaganda reached all segments of society. This logic has created a system that rewards non-competitive behaviour (p.93).

After the provincial television station launched its own satellite channel by the end of the 1990s, practically all of the provincial level television stations became domestically broadcast television channels. However, the majority of the provincial television stations were still based on their own regions and used administrative forces to integrate their local media resources, including cable networks, hardware and personnel to protect their local dominance. To a certain extent, the amalgamation of regional free-to-air and cable channels reduced competition in the regional television market and reinforced the provincial television stations' monopoly of local media resources, preventing any regional media advertising revenue from being shared by other regional media (Wang, 2003). Territorial autonomy differentiates the Chinese television market from the television market in the capitalist countries which was basically formed by marketing competition rather than administrative intervention. After China's entrance into the WTO, the Chinese government endeavoured to form regional-based superstations and media conglomerates (e.g. Shanghai Media Groups in Shanghai, South Media Groups in Guangdong province and Hunan Media Groups in Hunan Province) to enhance China's media competitiveness.

⁸ All levels of regional-based television stations are subject to the Provincial Broadcast and Television Bureau. Television media is an important investment and revenue source for the local government. .

The Guangdong television market is unique, in terms of its overseas media access. It was opened to global competition in late 2001 when the government enacted a special policy of granting landing rights to overseas television channels to deliver signals via a local cable network in Guangdong province. As Dao Lü⁹ explains, the pressure GDTV for their survival perceived from the environment in Guangdong Province began around the beginning of this century,

Because there were too many overseas media, the survival space became more and more limited. GDTV wanted to attract audience attention and win them back (personal communication, August 14, 2005).

To a certain extent, it can be said that the launch of the *TGCFS* in 2000 was GDTV's effort to find a breakthrough in the rapid shrinkage of their survival space in Guangdong province. According to CMR's research on the coverage of Chinese television channels in 2004, GDTV reached about 0.4 billion domestic viewers, including about 14 million of the Guangdong viewing population (Xie & Dang, 2005). Although there was plenty of evidence (e.g. a wide regional coverage of participants, satellite broadcasting and domestic distribution) demonstrating the crew's ambition to explore the domestic market, the crew's most desired market remained Guangdong province, because the local market was the major advertising source for GDTV. Although CCTV is in the leading position in terms of the domestic television market share, in the regional television market, the predominance of the local television stations was overwhelming. In the commercialization era, a domestically-aired satellite channel became a provincial television stations' important resource in raising advertising rates by appealing to nationwide advertisers.

It is important to note that in the Chinese television market wider signal coverage does not necessarily bring higher audience ratings. Likewise, higher audience ratings

⁹ He was a contracted employee in GDTV before he was engaged in the production of the inaugural season of *TGCFS*. He was hired to develop the production project for the crew during the preproduction station and later volunteered to be one of the three ordinary "challengers" in the filming.

are not equivalent to a high advertising revenue¹⁰. Generally speaking, there is an imbalance in the economic development in the east and the west of China. The advertising revenue available to a provincial-level television station is directly proportional to the GDP of the region (Wang, 2003). In the last three decades, the pattern of Chinese economic development emerged as a competition between the three regional-based “economic circles”¹¹ in the east coast, including the area around the Bohai Sea, the Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta (Wang, 2003).

Guangdong province is located in a manufacturing base of light industry in the Pearl River Delta area. Locally-based enterprises are the main commercial resource for GDTV. In the case of the *TGCF*S production, two local daily product enterprises¹² were major sponsors of the second and third season respectively. As an economic centre in China, Guangdong province’s great consumption potential also attracts many domestic sizable enterprises and corporations to promote their brands to the Guangdong market. Many national brands like to advertise their product through a provincial-level broadcaster to achieve the widest signal coverage in the region instead of pursuing a higher frequency of media exposure and wider coverage of audience reception nationwide. For instance, the first season of *TGCF*S was sponsored by Harbin No.6 Pharmaceutical Manufactory which is located in northern China. In order to open up the domestic market, this nationalized sizable enterprise advertised its brand pharmaceutical “Gai zhong gai” among regional television

¹⁰ For instance, Hunan Satellite TV is located in the economically relatively undeveloped Hunan province in the mid continent. Lack of advertisement resources forced Hunan Satellite Television to break the boundary of its region market and tear off its regional label (Xie & Dang, 2005). It emerged as a flagship of a line of provincial satellite channels in the late 1990s. In 2003, Hunan Satellite TV officially changed its name to “China Hunan Satellite TV” and became the first provincial satellite channel to reach the top three position of domestic signal coverage and scored top ratings among 48 provincial television channels (Yin & Li, 2004). Although in terms of the ratings and signal coverage, GDTV was unable to beat Hunan Satellite TV in the domestic television market, GDTV widened the gap for advertising revenue. It was reported that the advertising revenue of GDTV in 2003 was about ¥ 1 billion and that of Hunan Media Group Channel was about 0.66 billion (Xie & Dang, 2005).

¹¹ The pattern of Chinese economic development emerges as a competition of the three regional-based economic circles, including the Yangtze River Delta in the mid of the east coast, the Pearl River Delta in the southeast of China and the area around the Bohai Sea in the Northeast of China (Wang, 2003). According to statistics, in 2004 three regional superstations (Beijing Television, Shanghai Media Groups, and South Media Groups) located in three “economic circles” respectively made up of more than 40% of the entire ¥ 29.15 billion (US\$3.64 billion) domestic television advertising revenue (CJR, 2005).

¹² *Di hua zhi xiu* (shampoo), *Qiaoqiao* (daily product enterprise)

channels to reach potential consumers in different regions¹³. It can be said that the local market provides GDTV with a strong local base for raising production funds.

The post-production of the fourth season made an interesting case to demonstrate the GDTV makers' great concerns of attracting Guangdong viewers. GDTV faced a television market which has a strong cultural difference defined through dialects¹⁴. The crew usually edited one version of the *TGCFs* series and dubbed it in Mandarin and Cantonese respectively to cater to Mandarin-speaking audiences of the domestically-broadcast Guangdong Satellite Television Channel and Cantonese-speaking viewers of the locally-aired Pear River Channel. Dongxia Liu, the post-production Director of the Mandarin version, asserts that,

Having broadcast three seasons, the production crew found a commonly shared issue. The Cantonese-speaking area and the Mandarin-speaking area were like two different countries with no national border (personal communication, August 1, 2006).

China is a country with a vast territory. Due to differences in geography, culture and economic environment, there are vast divisions in viewing interests in different regional audiences (Wang, 2003). A television drama popular in one region is not necessarily favoured by the viewer in other regions. In this case, audience feedback made the production team aware that the television viewers of the domestically-broadcast Guangdong satellite channels and locally-aired Pearl River channel had very different cultural interests and aesthetic preferences. The narrative style of the early three seasons seemed to cater to the domestic Mandarin-speaking

¹³ In 1999, "Gai zhong gai's" strategies of achieving a high frequency exposure and wide coverage of timeslots in nationwide broadcast channels had a great impact on television promotional modes of other national pharmaceutical factories" (Ou et. 2006, p.61). In the past decade, releasing TV commercials on nationwide regionally-based television stations has become a common strategy for many sizable domestic enterprises to spur their domestic sales.

¹⁴ Mandarin is China's official language, dominating Chinese media broadcasting. Although the Chinese population shares the same written language, the diversity of local dialects result in a complex national communication system. Cantonese as one of the major dialects shared among the Chinese population in the Pearl River Delta and extensively in the southeast of Asia. In the early 2000s, except for a few regional television stations located in the habitats of ethnic minorities providing other languages (e.g. Tibetan, Mongolian and Uigur) and broadcasting services to their regional viewers, Guangdong was a unique case in dialect television broadcasting to regional viewers.

viewers rather than to the local Cantonese-speaking viewers.

In order to increase the popularity of the programme in the local television market as well as satisfying the viewing habits of the domestic Mandarin-speaking viewers in general, in this fourth season the crew contributed two independently-edited versions. Local post-production director Jun Ceng was assigned to create the Cantonese version. He was considered to be very familiar with local viewing tastes and to be capable of tailoring the programme to cater to the specific viewing patterns of Cantonese-speaking viewers. Production Supervisor Chun Yan observes that

Television viewers in the south China are more likely to watch TV drama than those in the north. Moreover, the Guangdong viewer and Cantonese-speaking viewer were probably influenced by Hong Kong TV a lot. They seemed to prefer viewing programmes with a faster rhythm (personal communication, August 23, 2006).

The Guangdong editor cut out the part of the host and re-constructed the competition as a “real life” soap. The editing pace of the Cantonese version also seems relatively fast in comparison to previous seasons and the Mandarin version of the fourth season. Jun Ceng imitated the narrative style of the popular American television drama *24* (Fox 2002-) in terms of interweaving different storylines carried out synchronically in different spaces in one frame by splitting the images. Such a narrative style accelerates the narrative rhythm and intensifies the game playing.

The Mandarin version was edited by post-production director Dongxia Liu who has a north Chinese cultural background. The narration of the Mandarin version continuously follow the established *Survivor*-style game-doc formula with an involvement of the host and applied a conventional narrative approach to address domestic viewers who grew up watching CCTV and are assumed to feel more comfortable with such a presentation.

The most explicit difference between the two versions is rooted in the voice over.

Each version was processed in two very different ways. The Cantonese voice over adopted a Hong Kong style which sounds more informal and entertaining; whereas the narration of the Mandarin version applied an orthodox broadcast tone to address domestic viewers in general. The post-production director, Dongxia Liu comments that

The voice-over of Cantonese version sounds very casual and chatty which would drive the north audience mad, but would be enjoyed by the Guangdong viewer. The style of Jiang Hui (Mandarin narrator)'s voice over wins the favour of the north audience, but is not popular among the Guangdong viewer (personal communication, August 1, 2006).

Such an approach was made according to the crew's understanding of the different viewing patterns of the Guangdong viewer in particular and domestic viewers in general. Having two post-production teams working on one project made for a unique case in the Chinese television industry. Although paying adequate attention to its local viewers' distinctive viewing habits and interests can be viewed as an evidence of the crew's raise of commercial consciousness, from a marketing perspective, this kind of practice was against the logics of production cost control.

It is noticeable that the two post-production directors processed two versions with different narrative styles and formats according to their respective interests and understanding of their target audience. Nevertheless, the content of the two versions have no significant differences, because two editors worked on the same raw materials and constructed the real-life story according to the actual events. Director Hong Huang insists that "the budget of *TGCFs* was not our major concern. We wanted to make a unique programme" (personal communication, June 16, 2006). His comment suggests that economic profit was not the foremost objective of the production team. Instead their professional ambition was a driving force in that period. This kind of attitude distinguishes this state-funded production from conventional commercial production.

9.4 The Ambivalent Marketing Concerns

The profitability of a television production is often the major concern of a commercial media house while budgeting for a production proposal and evaluating the finished programme. However, as a state-funded television production, the foregrounding of audience ratings was not necessarily associated with profit making. Producer Xiaoming Li claims that “unlike a private-run company who needs to consider the balance between revenue and expenditure, this was not the responsibility of the filming crew” (personal communication, November 30, 2006). Li points out that the crew operated the production in a media institution which had not been well integrated into a corporate structure. Production Supervisor Chun Yan claims that

Although we have become more and more tailored to a marketing operation by seasons, production and marketing have not achieved an integration of operation, which is a relatively weak aspect. It has not been up to the production team to manage the programme (personal communication, August 23, 2006)

To a large extent, the *TGCFs* crew members’ contribution to the commercial operation was limited in the aspects of promotion and programming. Selling advertisements and broadcasting rights were in fact two major ways of generating revenues that were charged to the Advertising Sector and Distribution Sector respectively. However, the two sectors directly reported to the authorities of the television station and lacked any intimate cooperation with the production sector of the station. The problematic management model of the television station had a significant effect on the commercial operation of the *TGCFs* programme.

9.4.1 Revenue Building

Compared with their Western commercial counterparts, the means of revenue building for this Chinese production was not only restricted in category, but was also different in process. The sale of commercial time on GDTV was basically according

to timeslot rather than attached to a specific programme. This was a conventional mode for advertising sales widely shared by other Chinese television stations that had not been fully transformed into a corporate mode of advertising sales. In this case, the distinctive management pattern of the television institution not only prevented the crew from making contributions to the advertising sales of their own production, but made it difficult to count the gross earnings of advertising revenue for each season¹⁵.

Generally speaking, there was a lack of coordination between the production crew and the business management team. Although the Advertising Sector played an important role in find a sponsor for the production, its interaction with the production sector seemed superficial. Production Supervisor Chun Yan comments that

The advertising agent would convey the requests of the sponsor to us and introduce the programme and the available choice of sponsorship to the client. However, the terms of how this commercial information could be integrated into the programme was not their concern (personal communication, August 23, 2006).

What Yan suggests here is that the advertising agent mainly achieved a mechanical information exchange, but provided rather substantial support to the commercial practice of the *TGCFs* production. As a result, without active interaction and efficient communication with advertising professionals in the station, the programme makers had to rely on learning from other commercial media productions to enhance their commercial consciousness and polish their marketing skills.

9.4.1.1 Sponsorship

Evidently, with the local television maker gradually immersing themselves in a commercial production environment, the forms of sponsorship were enriched and the

¹⁵ Producers generally estimated that the profit created by the *TGCFs* series should be able to pay off the investment in all those years because the funds provided by the sponsors covered most of the investment from the television station. To a large extent, the income of crew members were not closely associated with the profits created by the production and the advertising revenue and distribution income went directly to the television station. GDTV has no requirement to have a precise accounting of the earnings for each season.

dynamics between the commercial brand and the programming were enhanced through the seasons. In the earlier two seasons, the major sponsor merely gained naming rights¹⁶, programme-attached advertisements¹⁷ and acknowledgements in the final credits¹⁸. With the GDTV makers growing consciousness of commercialization, they became more sophisticated in integrating sponsorship into the programming. Production Supervisor Chun Yan stresses that

After I took over the programme since the third season, sponsors began to make contact with us. They made their requests about how to present them and organize an activity. From then on we became aware of the importance of sponsors (personal communication, August 23, 2006).

The crew's advertising strategies were advanced in later seasons. Product placement¹⁹ was introduced in the fourth season, as the "Go-Tone" service²⁰ became an important element of the survival game. During the competition, the director gave instruction on the rules to the contestants by using the "Go-Tone" mobile communication service in the remote area. Such arrangements not only made the product placement seemed natural to the viewer, but also demonstrated the reliable function of the "Go-Tone" service.

Besides concerns with the commercial return of the major sponsors, the crew also paid more attention to other sponsors. Many local and domestic business enterprises, such as sports retailers, travel agencies, hotels and airlines also contributed to the

¹⁶ This sponsorship was sold to the business enterpriser who financed the production. The name of the commercial sponsor or its product was attached to the title of the programme, "The Great Challenge for Survivor". As the example of the third season, the major sponsor is a Guangdong-based daily product enterprise. "Qiaoqiao" is the brand of its product which was placed before the title of *TGCF*S and widely exposed in promotions and first run screenings.

¹⁷ This kind of advertisement is closely attached to the programme. The TV commercial of the sponsor often would be shown in the beginning, during each break and after each episode. The sponsorship of the commercial sponsor would be announced in the beginning of each episode by graphics and voice over

¹⁸ The production team would acknowledge the contribution of the sponsors by showing their names and logos in the rolling credits at the end of each episode.

¹⁹ This is a type of soft advertisement. The programme makers would integrate the logo or product of the sponsor into the programming and making it seem natural to the viewer.

²⁰ China's leading mobile communication service provider, "Chinese Telecom" was the major sponsor of the later three seasons. "Go-Tone" is a brand which provides a global mobile communication service.

production. Since the third season, the crew became more flexible in exercising a commercial practice of sponsorship. For instance, during the *Survivor*-style competition in Saipan, a luxury hotel in Tianning island who sponsored the production was presented as a reward for the winning team to enjoy a decent meal and stay overnight in its presidential suite. This approach bears some resemblance to its Western origin.

Increasingly towards the later seasons, the pressure of recovering investment and making a profit increased. During my production research at GDTV in 2006, the crew's pressure to find a sponsor for the scheduled seventh season became intense during the preproduction period. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the *Survivor*-style format had gradually lost its market appeal and talent-contest formats became the favourite in the domestic market since 2003. The GDTV traditional way of investing in a project, in terms of financing the projects first and then finding sponsors, was no longer appropriate to the changes taking place in GDTV. Production Supervisor Chun Yan admits that

In the last few years, the production team has gradually felt the pressure of receiving appropriate funds from GDTV. It is not easy to get funds from a television station if the programme does not have a sponsor (personal communication, August 23, 2006).

The changes to the funding of this entertainment-oriented production indicates that sponsorship was no longer an alternative choice, but a determinative factor in initiating a production in the state-owned media institution. After years of progressing into becoming a marketing operation, GDTV gradually demonstrated the attributes of a business enterprise and commercial traits became more explicit in its production agenda. However, the responsibility of the production team in the television station generally ended after the first run of their programme. The distribution of the programme itself was taken care of by the Distribution Sector which is in charge of importing and exporting programmes.

9.4.1.2 Distribution

In the early 2000s, GDTV successfully distributed the (usually two year) broadcasting rights of the *TGCFS* series to overseas television networks²¹, such as the Tokyo Chinese television station, Hong Kong ATV and TVB. Through those networks this domestically-produced reality programme reached Chinese populations around the world. According to producer Jian Zhao, “the first season was one of the best selling domestically produced programmes in the overseas market in 2000” (personal communication, August 9, 2006). However, the distribution of *TGCFS* in China reflects the relatively complex mechanisms of the domestic television system and the unique structure of its market competition.

With more than forty domestically broadcast satellite channels, it has been common for a Chinese audience to see different channels screening the same dramas and similar formats of self-produced entertainment programmes. The production and trade of television drama in China has achieved a real sense of marketization in the last decade. Television drama making has relied more on social resources and capital. Due to its significant function of spurring ratings, television stations as broadcasters in China have been engaging in fierce competition for broadcasting rights, in particular first run broadcasting rights and more recently for solo broadcasting rights.

TGCFS belongs to a type of self-produced and self-broadcast programme made to demonstrate the production capability of the television station (this point is further discussed in the following section). In non-competition days, the self-produced programme was mainly circulated within the channels of the television station itself. With the emergence of a competitive structure within the domestic satellite channels

²¹ According to information provided by the Distribution Sector of GDTV, the first two seasons were sold to Tokyo Chinese television Station in 2002. From 2003 to 2005, Hong Kong-based ATV bought the second season and TVB purchased the third to fifth seasons.

since the late 1990s, the overlapping of the signal coverage of the satellite channels in China determined that *TGCFs* could only be sold to regionally aired channels²² for its later run of screening. For many city-level television stations, it would be more economical to buy a finished programme than to produce this kind of large-scale and big-budget outdoor survival format themselves.

As mentioned in Chapter Five, the *TGCFs* crew initially expected to compete for ratings with television drama. The *TGCFs* series hybridized game show and soap opera formats which they anticipated to sell to the regional-aired television station/channel as a “real life” soap for its second run. Nevertheless, such definitions of their programme were not acknowledged in the buyers’ market. For instance, the investment into the fifth season was ¥ 15 million (US\$ 1.875 million) which corresponds to a large budget television drama in China. The series was edited down to 43 minutes per episode in order to sell it as a drama. A production assistant for Vhand, Yang Fang²³ confirmed that “the distribution model of the *TGCFs* was similar to that of television drama. However, television stations treated the reality show as a ‘special topic programme’ rather than as drama” (personal communication, November 22, 2006). Television stations often priced this kind of reality programme according to documentary scales, ranging from ¥ 50 to 100 per minute. The 32-episode fifth season was sold to Shanghai TV’s Documentary Channel for ¥ 100,000 (about US\$12,500).

Compared to the levels of investment in production, the amounts of money earned from distribution indicated that the contribution of distribution was very limited in balancing the overall production costs. Moreover, the lower market revenue from non-fiction programmes (including both conventional documentary and reality-based hybrid programmes) reflected the restricted demand of the domestic market.

²² The broadcasting rights of the first to fourth season of *TGCFs* series was sold to Hunan TV’s Public Channel for ¥ 74,405 in 2003 and 2004. The fifth season of the *TGCFs* was sold to Dalian TV, Henan TV and Xinjiang TV and Shanghai TV’s Documentary Channel.

²³ The fifth season of the *TGCFs* (2004) was co-produced by GDTV and Beijing-based production company, Vhand who was responsible for the distribution of the fifth season and had experience in distributing *Into Shangri-La* (2001).

Compared to the prosperity of television drama in the domestic television market, the competitiveness of the *TGCFS* series was unable to reach the same level as its Western origin in terms of television trade.

Generally speaking, the market price of the two-year broadcasting right of a season averagely was no more than ¥ 100,000 (about US\$12,500) in the overseas market and no more than ¥ 25,000 (about US\$ 3,125) in the domestic market. As the production itself averaged ¥ 3 million (about US\$ 375,000) per season, the income from distribution only recovered a small portion of any initial investment.

No doubt, making profit was anticipated by the station when it invested in the production project. However, the means of building revenue was very limited in this Chinese production. A lack of originality in the format and an absence of a well developed production formula are common problems in the Chinese television industry. Although in the past decade Chinese production houses have started to engage in the global television format trade by purchasing foreign popular television formats, this business has largely been a one way trade. Chinese television's contribution to original television formats has been absent in the global television market. Over the last decade, Chinese television professionals have managed to catch up to up-to-date global television trends. However, their capability for creating original television formats and the practice of protecting copyrights in the Chinese television system has been lagging behind²⁴. Therefore, selling original formats has not been an available option in the business of Chinese reality programmes.

Moreover, selling audio-visual products (video/DVD) as another important way of making profits from many Western popular reality productions have also been difficult to process in the circumstances of China's television with its isomorphic nature (Keane, 2003). Among all locally-produced outdoor survival format

²⁴ As the example of the outdoor survival strand, *TGCFS* and its local followers all took ideas from the Western *Survivor* format or its spin-offs, and then localized the Western formula according to their own interests and production capability. However, none of them purchased the rights from the owner of the copyrights of the original format.

programmes, GDTV's inaugural season of *TGCFS*, *Tracing China Overland Border*, a pioneering Chinese reality programme, was the only series distributed in the domestic audio-visual market²⁵.

Within the six years of its production history, GDTV's investment in *TGCFS* was increased from ¥ 1.8 million to 7 million (about US\$ 225,000-1,375,000) (see Appendix 4) and became one of the major annual investments for GDTV. The crew became more and more anxious about a situation where the continuously increased production budget and an improvement of production values was unable to stop a decline of the public's interest in the survival-based format year by year. Director Hong Huang argues that

We made great efforts to enhance the entertainment value of the format from the first season. However, we were unable to make efforts to enhance the marketing value which was not in our control (personal communication, June 13, 2006).

Hong complaint derives from the circumstance of the production crew having to bear the blame when *TGCFS* failed to achieve an anticipated marketing success. Despite the fact that the crew was not authorized to fully take responsibility for managing the programme, they still sought other ways to improve this weakness in distribution.

In the later seasons, the crew tried to improve the distribution by collaborating with other television stations, private-run production houses and a portal website to achieve wider distribution and better sales in the domestic market by taking advantage of external expertise, other channels and media (These issues are discussed in depth below). It can be said that the *TGCFS* series basically was not a profitable programme, in terms of economic gains. Generally speaking, making a profit was not the foremost factor influencing the station's decision to continuously invest in the *TGCFS* project for six seasons.

²⁵ A local art company purchased the copyrights and distributed VCD and DVD of the first season with ¥ 48,000 in 2002. The DVD copies of the second, third, fourth and sixth seasons provided by the production team for this study were not made for marketing sale.

9.4.2 The Foregrounding of Brand Influence

In the outdoor survival strand in China, *TGCFS* made a very unique case, in terms of being continuously produced for six seasons. It is noticeable that most local outdoor survival format productions were only made for one to two seasons, such as *Into Shangri-La* (Vhand, 2002) and *Survival Camp in Canyon* (GZTV, 2002-03). The outdoor survival strand passed its peak in the domestic television market in 2003. Since then the *TGCFS* series basically became the only “survivor” struggling to achieve the same phenomenal rating success as its origins, by continuously modifying the programming and production model.

For a television station, the “self-produced” programme, in particular these major investments, have a unique function. The *TGCFS* series were valued by Chief Production Supervisor Xüyang, Sun, as “creating a brand influence for the GDTV” (personal communication, December 11, 2006). Therefore, commercial patterns were considered to be more important than making money. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, facing a new competitive structure as provincial territory satellite-broadcast channels breached CCTV’s dominance on national signal coverage and leading position in the domestic market share, major provincial broadcasters often utilized its satellite channel to enhance its signal coverage nationwide, while also starting to enhance their competitiveness in aspects of programme content and brand image (Yin & Li, 2004). It became important for a territory-based media house to advertise itself to domestic viewers. Both the Guangdong satellite channels and the Pearl River channel are regarded as a window for GDTV to advertise itself in order to compete for more advertising revenue. Director Hong Huang asserted that “this programme won social benefits and a reputation. The travel model of filming promotes the image of GDTV across the nation” (personal communication, July 11, 2006).

This kind of large-scale of production was also a way for GDTV to demonstrate their

production capability which was an important message to be acknowledged in the industry. In the West, “Reality TV” programmes are associated with “cheap” television, because their production costs are usually lower than that of conventional dramas and sitcoms (Andrejevic, 2004). However it is neither the case of the *TGCFS* series, nor the case of *Survivor* itself. As the Postproduction director Hui Fang comments, “this kind of reality format is not easy, fast and cheap to make” (personal communication, July 21 2006). The *TGCFS* involved a big investment of money and people. The size of the production team was similar to a big-project team in GDTV which had about twenty regular members. The production team cared more about proving their production capability and enhancing their reputation in the domestic media industry.

In order to create a name brand programme for GDTV, economic gains were not the foremost objective, but ratings were an important index to prove the public appeal of their programmes. Ultimately, *TGCFS* served a far more significant function, in terms of assisting GDTV to achieve a long term marketing success in both the domestic and especially international television markets. From this perspective, although the institutional structure of the state-run television station had not adapted well to the commercial management of its self-produced programme, Western commercial thinking had penetrated into the minds of GDTV operators.

9.4.3 Risk Control of Production Investment

Production supervisor, Xüyang Sun argues that

In the past, we did not consider the cost or did not care very much about recovering the production cost. Producing and broadcasting were internally circulated within the station. This is a unique characteristic of the Party-run business. Gradually, we have had more and more contacts within the market and have become market conscious (personal communication, December 11, 2006).

Sun points out a commonly shared pattern of Chinese television stations in the planned economy whose institutional ecology was rooted in a self-supporting and self-contained mechanism. However, since the late 1990s, documentary programme makers in GDTV had perceived, as mentioned in Chapter Three, the difficulties of obtaining funds from the television station, because the self-produced documentaries were no longer merely circulated within the television system in the form of a programme exchange between television stations. Instead, they started to seek access to the competition for ratings and to bear a basic responsibility for making revenue. The restriction of the *TGCFs* crew's contribution to the commercial practices of the production in programming, filming and post-production did not ease these local programme makers' desire to polish their marketing skills to cope with increasing commercial imperatives within the broader production environment.

To change the old institutional structure of GDTV to better adapt to the new media ecology involves systematic work including considerable coordination between different sectors in a commercial operation, the engagement of experienced experts and even co-production with other production houses. The multiple roles and function of a television station as political instrument and money generator, content producer and broadcaster complicate the process of applying Western commercial practices to its institutional operations. Instead of focusing on balancing production expenses and economic revenue, the authorities in GDTV were encouraged to reduce the investment risk through cost control. Co-investing in *TGCFs* with other production houses was considered an effectively way of reducing the overall investment risk.

In 2004, GDTV co-produced the fifth season, *Hero on the Way* (*Ying xiong gu dao*) with Beijing-based private-run production house, Vhand Culture Communication Co., Ltd, one of the earliest local reality programme production companies. Its *Survivor*-style series, *Into Shangri-La* (*Zouru xianggelila*) (2001) was reportedly distributed to more than 20 television stations in China in 2001 (CCTV& Qinghua

University, 2002).

GDTV for the first time in its history opened its door for the private-run television company to access its own production both in practice and capital. After a series of negotiations, GDTV and Vhand invested ¥7 million (about US\$ 437,000) and ¥ 4 million (about US\$ 500,000) respectively. GDTV would hold the broadcasting rights of the fifth season in Guangdong province and own the local advertising revenue. In return, Vhand retained the copyright of the fifth season and shares the earnings of its domestic and overseas distribution with GDTV on a fifty-fifty basis.

GDTV's motivations of co-production mainly are to absorb reality production experience, reduce production costs, enhance programme's publicity and achieve better distribution. The business management of the television production was argued as the strength of the private run media house in comparison to that of the television station (Lu & Xian, 2005). Driven by the logic of a market economy, privately-run production houses often targeted economic gains within the framework of official accounts and media censorship.

Compared to the superstation GDTV, Vhand is much smaller in scale. However, it seemed more flexible and efficient in carrying out commercial practices in television production and trade. Vhand claimed to have a multimedia network, covering more than 20 television stations, more than 280 newspapers and periodicals, 127 websites and broadband online game companies and a mobile texting platform across the country (CCTV & Qinghua University, 2002). This resource offered a great attraction for the GDTV operators.

As mentioned in the section 9.3, the territorial autonomy of the Chinese television industry resulted in the foregrounding of the interests of the regional television market among the territory-based television stations. The commercialization of *TGCF*S exposed the weakness of the regional-based television station in the distribution of its

self-produced programmes in the domestic market. In order to make a long-term investment on a big-budget production as such, GDTV recognized the importance of improving the domestic distribution of the series to enhance its reputation and increase its economic gains.

In the following year, GDTV continue its tradition of cooperation, but changed its working partners to another domestic *Survivor*-format production team in provincial-level Guizhou Television (GZTV) (2005) who had made *Survival Camp in Canyon (Xigu Shengcunying)* in 2003. This time the cooperation was also extended to the newly emerged portal website 21CN.com who provided the most up to date broadband entertainment to domestic net users.

9.4.4 Multimedia Collaboration

With the rapid development of internet technologies and the prevalence of computers among the urban population in China in the last decade, the internet became an important channel for the programme to reach its desired audience and communicate with their viewers. The *TGCFs* crew's interaction with the internet started from the second season. In 2002, GDTV founded its official website. From then on the internet was treated as a supplement of television media, providing a platform for the *TGCFs* team to publicize relevant information. The programme set up its own webpage and online forums to allow communication with its fans. It gradually become an important site for the filming crew to access audience opinion of the series.

In its production history, the internet also played important role in recruiting volunteers which was considered beneficial to raising the average educational level of the contestants. It was not until the fifth season, however, that the production team had a clear intention to expand their viewing population via the internet. An online interactive game for the fifth season was used as part of Vhand's production project. Although this innovative idea was eventually abandoned due to technical difficulties,

Vhand used this idea in its promotion to create widespread curiosity - and in the process raised the GDTV producer's consciousness of having a substantial multi-media collaboration.

In 2005, this television event was relocated to 21CN.com. It set up an online channel "show.21cn.com" (2005) for the sixth season of the *TGCFS* series which was claimed as the first Chinese "reality show" channel on the internet. According to the data provided by GDTV, 21CN was reported to have more than eight million netizens at that time. During the first run of the television broadcast of the series between August and November, this channel had about seven million visitors. GDTV attempted to reach a potential audience of desired demographics, assumed to longer belong to the group of regular television viewers through their multi-media collaboration. Evidently, television became an important content provider for the newly emerged broadband entertainment service and in turn popular television programmes satisfied the internet's need for updated entertainment content.

Besides the internet, the production crew were also encouraged to integrate other media resources into their television programming for the purpose of enhancing a programme's publicity and enlarging its audience size. Multi-media collaboration was actively carried out in the promotion and programming of the *TGCFS* series throughout its six seasons. The media that the programme interacted with extended from traditional media radio, print media, to mobile phones. In the sixth season, following the fashion of deploying an audience interactive strategy in reality programming that was initiated by *Super Girls*, the production integrated a weekly live broadcast of evictions (see Figure 38). The audience was encouraged to vote for the contestant they supported. The one who had the least public votes would have to leave the game. This strategy was adopted to convey to audiences a sense of participation. However, it did not effectively serve to bring up the ratings, since these had dropped below an average 3%.



1 The *Survivor*-style tribe council



2 A graphic of the public votes

Figure 38 Weekly live broadcast of eviction

Besides advertising the series on GDTV's channels, print media played an important role in connecting the audience with the programme makers. The social commentaries from print media, in particular the major local newspapers, such as *Yangcheng Evening*, *Nanfang Daily*, *Guangzhou Daily* and *South Metropolis*, were influential to the production team which considered them as representing the voice of the masses as well as shaping public opinion and impacting on the authorities' evaluation of the programme. However, the crew lacked a consciousness and desire to explore the potential for this media collaboration. In most cases, they mainly followed a familiar tradition of holding press conferences and inviting local journalists to visit filming locations. These kind of routinized media collaborations did not prove effective in generating journalists' interests in reporting on the show²⁷.

Although the *TGCFs* team often made a quick response to the new trends in multi-media strategies adopted by Western commercial television programming, they did not fully explore the great potential for these multi-media collaborations. This kind of situation can largely be attributed to a lack of marketing savvy.

9.5 Controversial Publicity Strategy

The prosperity of domestic reality television market since the mid 2000s made the

²⁷ A critique about the *TGCFs* crew collaboration with print media is included in Chapter Nine

TGCFS crew very anxious about winning wider public attention. Their basic formula of promotion in terms of holding a press conference to announce the launch of the project, making television trailers to promote the series and inviting journalists to report on the filming were no longer sufficient to generate social curiosity about the new season of *TGCFS*. As director Huang Hong pointed out,

Although publicity channels were limited at that time, the inaugural season became a high profile media affair due to the novelty of the subject. Nowadays, there are too many ‘shows’ and similar media available which has reduced public awareness.[...] The crew struggled to create a “subject” [for social discussion]. Even though we had a “subject”, we still needed the media to follow up to report in order to create a phenomenon (personal communication, June 16, 2006).

Such a perspective was based on a recognition of the function which multimedia publicity played in constructing for *TGCFS* a high public profile. Nevertheless, it was not until the sixth season that these GDTV programme makers started to make sense of how to effectively draw attention by utilizing other media to generate wider social discussions. Crew members’ long established perceptions of publicity experienced some challenges in the process of becoming more marketing savvy. Here, the focus is drawn to the issue of “chao zuo”. This Chinese popular term emerged in the 1990s to refer to the act of enhancing popularity through media hype. Although this term contains negative connotations of a sensationalizing of fact and making profits through speculation, it is arguably a short cut to gaining public attention. Producer Jian Zhao explicitly noted the problem of “no ‘chao zuo’, no awareness” (personal communication, August 9, 2006). Although this comment seems to exaggerate the situation, Zhao’s concern to a certain extent reflects the intensity of the rating competition that the crew were facing during my on-location research in 2006.

This production research reveals that the crew’s attitude towards “chao zuo” experienced a fundamental change in the sixth season, *Hero under the Heaven*²⁸ in

²⁸ This season co-produced by GDTV and GZTV in the summer of 2005. GDTV was responsible for a one month survival competition in an isolated beach in Guangdong province from July to August and a three month

2005. Shortly after the beginning of filming, the crew faced a crisis from the loss of about half of the contestants. Besides two weekly-evicted contestants, two young men retreated from the competition due to their poor condition of health caused by starvation and sunburn. Soon after another four “hungry” contestants went “on strike” because the film crew refused their request for a proper meal. How to cope with this protest was a dilemma for the crew, in terms of maintaining the fairness of the competition, ensuring a sustainable number of contestants to continue the filming and protecting the reputation of the programme and the television station.

In the past, the conflicts between the contestants and the production team were muted in the broadcast series in order to minimize the potential negative impact on the public image of both sides of any media exposure of the bare truth. The producer’s typical way of dealing with the behind-the-scenes “noncooperation/rebellion” was to use some mild personal excuses such as health problems or a working call to present the leaving of the contestant. This time the crew took a more subversive approach. Director Huang Hong points out that

The crew intentionally exposed the news about contestants quitting the filming for a meal box to the journalist. In the past, such information would be hidden from the media (personal communication, June 16, 2006).

The decision to make the behind-the-scenes crisis transparent in fact involved a struggle. When local journalist Jun Fu²⁹ proposed the idea of reporting the affair in a “negative” way, in terms of addressing contestants’ protesting against the production team’s “tortures”, the production supervisor initially hesitated to take on this suggestion. Television stations are subject to the propaganda bureau of the Party and government. Therefore, operators of television stations are often sensitive to any

competition in Canada from September to October. The crew from Guangzhou television station who had made another *Survivor* format programme, called *Survivor Camp in Canyon* (2002) were in charge of one month competition in a valley in Guizhou.

²⁹ Mr. Fu was a journalist of a Guangdong-based best-sell newspaper *South Metropolis* (*Nanfang dushi bao*) who reported the sixth season of *TGCF* for the entertainment column.

negative media coverage about its productions. In this studied case, negative media coverage of the production, in particular relating to ethical issues was what those state-employed television professionals attempted to avoid, because it was likely to harm the reputation of both the programme and GDTV. Jun Fu acknowledges that

The television's televisual discourse is sufficient in China, but it ignores the internet, print media and other media. The early five seasons did not have publicity. They basically held a press conference and invited journalists to visit the site and assumed that the journalists would be interested in reporting the production. However, this was not the way of producing news. News is to let other people think this is news to be reported (personal communication, August 19, 2006).

Fu highlights a common pattern of Chinese television media at that time, in terms of lacking a consciousness for strategically utilizing other media to create wider media coverage and enhance public awareness. In China, print media were the pioneer mass media in carrying out industrialization reform in the early 1990s. Compared with the conservative television industry (Wang, 2003), print media's adaptation to marketization was fast. By the late 1990s journalism in Guangdong had developed as the flagship of domestic newspapers. The journalist in the local best-selling newspaper *South Metropolis* seemed more sophisticated in knowing how to mobilize public attention through the exercise of "chao zuo".

With the great attraction of achieving a breakthrough in static viewing ratings, the crew eventually took Jun Fu's suggestion and allowed themselves to be a target for social criticism. Fu Jun recalls that

The first day, *South Metropolis* gave a big size layout, titled "eighteen contestants being stranded in the devil island" which listed all the 'vicious treatments' in terms of providing no food and drink, and exposure under the sun. The report provoked resounding social response and debates. The second report revealed "four contestants escaping from the devil island". Some contestants stood up to negotiate with the television station for a meal because of the torture (personal communication, August 19, 2006).

The tabloid narratives and hype, in terms of describing the harsh natural environment as “devil island” and survival tasks as “tortures”, were adopted by Jun Fu to intrigue readers. In this case, the newspaper was utilized as a neutral site for two sides to carry out a public debate. These reports immediately generated public curiosity. Other print and online media reprinted these articles. (See Figure 39 Three images were released with the report of “The Great Challenge for Survival’ turning into a big ordeal: contestants protesting by self-torturing” (Fu, 2005)



A contestant capturing a snake for food



Competing for a bag of rice by moving ice cubes



Making a tent with stems and leaves

Figure 39 Photos of participants living circumstances in the beach

GDTV programme makers were amazed by the fact that the “negative” reportage of the programme effectively created public awareness. Production Supervisor Chun Yan admits that

Although this was a crisis, it was also an opportunity. It indeed aroused

media and audience's awareness. Instantly, many people started to pay attention to this incident (personal communication, August 23, 2006).



A sick contestant was sent away by the production team from the competition location

Figure 40 The filming crew taking a sick participant off the island.

During their unofficial investigation of audience reception, they even found that many people could recall the name of crew members and praised the volume and scale of the publicity of this season's production. This testimony effectively changed the crew's attitude towards "negative" media coverage. The director Hong Huang contributed to the discourse of sensationalistic tabloid journalism by confirming the crew's attitude towards contestants' attempts to retreat from the competition legally³⁰ by abstaining from food supplies and sunstroke (see Figure 40 which 'exposes' how those contestants escaped from the "devil" island). His words were directly quoted by journalist Jun Fu as

Being a reality programme, we authentically record their behaviour. We not only presented the circumstances of their struggling for survival in the outdoors, but also their cowardly side. For those people who had left, we

³⁰ According to the contract signed before the filming, the contestant could not drop off the filming according to their own wishes. During the competition, the crew basically would not provide assistance when they fainted or were lightly hurt, but expected team members to help each other. In order to quit the game with no legal penalty, some contestants came up with an idea of making themselves physically incapable of continuously carrying out the survival challenge.

would not cut out those scenes to protect their image (Fu, 2005).

In this occasion, the production crew developed the episode into a social interest discussion about a lack of survival skills and the responsibilities of the new generation of Chinese youth who were born in the 1980s under the one-child policy. Director Huang Hong stressed that “when a ‘reality show’ is upgraded to a phenomenon and discussion, it succeeds” (personal communication, June 16, 2006). Evidently, GDTV programme makers realized that in order to give their production a higher public profile, they would need the assistance of other mass media. In order to achieve this goal, the organizer of the television event had to act as a “media content provider”, in terms of creating social discussion and selling points for other media to further exploit and use as news materials.

In the past, the *TGCFs* team basically treated print media as a platform for publicizing GDTV’s official information and keeping up public interest about the media event by providing anecdotes about what occurred during the filming. In this case, this testimony made the *TGCFs* programme makers recognize a commercialist way of mobilizing public attention by conspiring with other mainstream media to sensationalize the behind-the-scenes farce. These events brought the GDTV programme makers much closer to Western commercialist thinking and practice.

Mapplebeck (2002) argues that “Reality TV, confession culture and tabloid hype are on a constant loop. A cyclical exchange, one feeds into another and back again” (p.32). The commercialist agenda of the sixth season suggests that with the deepening of commercialization in nationalized media institutions, this local reality programme making eventually fell into the same loop as had many of its Western counterparts. In this case, in order to survive the competition for ratings, the *TGCFs* crew became more concerned about public ignorance than any possible social critiques of their programme.

9.6 Conclusion

Many behind-the-scenes stories told in this chapter indicate that the commercialization of the *TGCFS* production exposed the weaknesses of GDTV in marketing. In order to fit into the commercial trends of entertainment programming, the crew had been committed to modifying their production approach by absorbing Western commercial strategies during its production history. However, a lack of sophisticated marketing skills and a short of sufficient knowledge about the audience often invalidated their efforts to achieve longer term ratings success. Moreover, the fragmentation of the industrial chain in GDTV also created an obstacle for the production team to processing marketing practices and to achieving their commercial goals.

The examples discussed in this chapter highlighted the conflict between a Western style commercial operation and a public service model in the primary stages of the commercialization of a Party-state run television station and also indicates that some kind of “accommodation” between the two models took place in practice. The old institutional system of the Party-state run television station established for a planned economy was no longer adaptable to the new requirements of the Chinese television market. However, the hybrid nature of Chinese television stations complicated the process of transforming the overall institutional structure to that of a business corporation. In the case of GDTV, operators’ attitudes towards Western style commercial operations seemed more cautious than those programme makers working in the frontline. As a result, the evolution of the production environment lagged behind the commercial experimentation of this pioneering reality production. Therefore, local programme makers, on one hand, had to continuously polish their marketing skills to compete for their audience. On the other hand, they often needed to adjust their commercial approach and interests to accommodate to the constraints of the institutional environment of GDTV itself.

The commercial experiment of the third season in 2002 allowed the production crew to recognise their weaknesses in reality programming and their limitations in marketing. After three years of accumulating production experience, the production team became more sophisticated in terms of reality production and was willing to make a breakthrough in the design of their format and production methods.

From 2003 domestic television screens were flooded with outdoor survival formats. The local market share was also challenged by entertainment programmes on overseas satellite channels (which had been granted rights to broadcast to Guangdong viewers since late 2001). In order to survive in particular in their local market, the *TGCF*S crew had an urgent need to win the battle for ratings. Besides enhancing the commercial values of their production, the crew also looked for a new and original idea for their fourth season to generate the same wider social profile as its inaugural season achieved in the beginning of this century. The following chapter discusses the *TGCF*S crew's contribution to the originality and creativity in adapting their *Survivor*-style format.

Chapter Ten: Original Format and Creative Approach

Over the past decade Western scholars have contributed “a wide range of responses to new factual television formats, remaining critical of the dumbing down that often results from market pressures, while also appreciating how commercialization can spur innovation and the creativity of hybrid forms” (Kilborn, 2003). The proliferation of reality formats since the late 1990s have largely enriched television outputs around the world.

Following the patterns of global transformations in the television media, the commercialization of Chinese television allows the Chinese viewer to experience something similar to television available in the West. However, China’s uptake of television reality formats in the last decade demonstrated a typical example of Keane’s (2003) idea of isomorphism. Due to the historically non-competitive production environment and a lagging-behind in legislation on intellectual property, cloning a market-tested programming has been widely treated as an easy way to address updated popular interest and to satisfy the needs of supply-driven television scheduling. This situation leads to an overflow of similar forms of programming on domestic television screens and largely shortens the life cycle of popular new forms of programming. Since the mid 1990s, the increasing competitiveness of domestic markets has forced many local television programme makers to be more innovative in programming.

The emergence of Reality TV in China foregrounds the issue of the localizing of Western formats to adapt to Chinese situations, as discussed in Chapter Three. Over the past decade, Chinese reality programme makers have exploited various global popular reality formats by drawing on a tradition of Chinese culture and ethics, among which GDTV professionals attempted to take the lead in programming a *Survival*-style format early this century. There was a consensus among the *TGCFS* crew members that the risk of being the pioneer also brought great opportunities to

win a dominant market share. None of the local followers replicated the market success which the inaugural season of *TGCFS* achieved in 2000. Their pioneering spirit encouraged the GDTV programme makers to continuously modify their established format and polish their production skills in order to refresh and upgrade their audience's viewing experience.

The production history of *TGCFS* was not only about imitation and cultural borrowing, but also about an original design and creative approach. The first three seasons of the *TGCFS* were considered a run-in period of localization by the *TGCFS* crew. By exercising various production approaches to explore a culturally-acceptable format with a long-lasting popularity, GDTV programme makers achieved a clear recognition of their strengths and weaknesses in reality programme making. Many problems and issues (e.g. the foregrounding of friendship over competition, a lack of game consciousness, a social critique on the dumbing down of cultural tastes as mentioned in the previous chapters) emerged in these three years of exploration. These urged local programme makers to come up with solutions to make this localized format accommodate to China's unique socio-political environment and cultural traits. With the accumulation of their reality production experience, in the production of the fourth season, the GDTV programme makers were also no longer satisfied with hybridizing a *Survivor* competition model with an *Airwave Boys*-style life experience format. Instead they were eager to innovate the format by designing new game rules with distinctive Chinese characteristics to cater to a Chinese audience's viewing habits and interests.

Taking the fourth season, *Brave Travel across History* (2003) as the major example (see Figure 41), this chapter focuses on the originality and creativity involved in this localized reality production. The discussion attempts to articulate the Chinese cultural context reflected in the design of the new game rules and the functions of specific production techniques applied to solve various problems resulting from the cultural inadaptability of the Western *Survivor* formula.



Figure 41 The 4th season: *Brave Travel across History* (2003)

10.1 A Request for New Game Rules

Based on years of production experience, production supervisor Hong Huang argues that “the success of the production has to rely on a set of well-designed game rules. *Survivor* has a relatively integrated set of rules which have less weak points in operation” (personal communication, June 19, 2006). This kind of perspective was based on the crew’s concern to maintain control over the non-scripted production, in terms of making ordinary people fully engaged into the contrived situation¹.

The production of the second and third season of *TGCFS* as well as many other locally made *Survivor*-like productions all proved that simply applying some *Survivor* elements/formula to the local production failed to generate effects similar to those created for the original *Survivor*. Instead, it could create obstacles to the process of filming. Post production director Dongxia Liu argues that

The design of the *Survivor* format involves a series of researches and none of its game rules is randomly set up. Therefore, it is inappropriate to casually make any change. It would be unable to achieve its expected effect if you change its setup (personal communication, August 1, 2006).

This understanding was based on long term speculation and practice. Nevertheless, due to the different production scale and institutional environment, the format

¹ As discussed in Chapter Seven a lack of game spirit was a headache for the *TGCFS* crew which largely affected the production process and sometimes caused crisis to the production.

development of this local production was unable to progress in a way that was similar to the Western commercial production. Moreover, China's cultural context and the crew's interest in a travel subject determined that the *TGCFs* format could not entirely clone the *Survivor* formula². Therefore, the GDTV producer realized that it was necessary to develop their own game rules which not only fit the local production scale, but were also applicable to the Chinese cultural context.

In this pioneering localized production, developing new game rules to distinguish the *TGCFs* format from its origins in fact had been put on the agenda since its second season. Nevertheless, designing a set of integrated game rules was a very difficult task in the project development. Production supervisor Hong Huang summarizes their exercise of designing game rules as a circulation of “establishing, deducing, abandoning and re-establishing” (personal communication, June 19, 2006). Their designed rules were often unworkable during their analysis and demonstration in the production meetings. After two years of struggling to innovate the “imperfect” format, the producers realized that it would be very difficult to achieve their professional goals by merely counting on innovations from a few key production members' brainstorming behind closed doors³.

In early 2003, GDTV set up a prize competition to recruit quality production proposals for the upcoming fourth season. The *TGCFs* crew's proposal was arranged to compete with both experts in the industry and outsiders. GDTV received about two hundred responses, among which only about ten proposals were relatively innovative, mainly contributed by television professionals and university students. According to Director Hui Han, “many received proposals were only a few pages and most of the ideas were explicitly influenced by *Survivor*” (personal communication, August 14, 2006). While the open competition widened the crew's options for collecting valuable

² Local programme makers' awareness of this issue is discussed in Chapter Six.

³ The limitation of this kind of production model as well as team members' awareness of this problem are examined in Chapter Nine.

ideas, the directors could not entirely count on recruiting a high quality production proposal by these means, because a shortage of experts in format design was a common problem in the Chinese television industry at that time.

In order to achieve a better understanding of how to operate a highly complex hybrid format in the Chinese context and enhance knowledge about new forms of television programming, Chinese media scholars (such as Professor Hong Yin from Qinhu University and Professor Ruxue Ran from Renmin University who contributed to “Reality TV” studies) were invited to give a lecture to the production crew before the filming⁴ or to be guests who could comment on the programme in the finale. Chinese reputable media expert and scholars, Hong Xi⁵ comments that

Many television programmes in China invited professors to provide expertise. Scholars could explain the theories of the Western reality format production. However, they could not solve realistic problems (personal communication, November 19, 2006).

His point of view was also shared by many other crew members who questioned the reliability of the knowledge of these media scholars since none of them had actually produced a “Reality TV” programme.

For the *TGCFS* crew, the most valuable proposal gathered from the prize competition was created by Hong Xi. He devised a set of new game rules, called a “1+2+3” model which particularly targeted the solving of some problems which emerged in the previous productions of *TGCFS*, in relation to Chinese participants' lack of game spirit and in response to social criticism of the Western-style competition. Eventually,

⁴ During the field research in GDTV in 2006, a group of media scholars and experts, including Beijing-based media expert Hong Xi, Professor Yuechuan Wang from Beijing University, Professor Huanzheng Feng from Zhongshan University and Hong Kong reputable television expert Li Zhang were invited to present their expertise to the programming of the upcoming *Go to the West Following the Footprint of the Master Monk Xuan Zhang*.

⁵ Hong Xi is a Beijing-based media expert and scholar who had reputation for programming in industry. He has been involving in the programming of many popular television programmes produced by CCTV and Hong Kong-based Phoenix Satellite TV ranging from talkshow, quiz show, television magazine programme and reality shows.

Hong Xi and the *TGCFS* team shared the ¥ 200,000 (about US\$ 25,000) cash prize for the winning proposals. The production plan of the fourth season combines Hong Xi's original game formula with the *TGCFS* team's idea of exploring the ancient Silk Road and carrying out the "deciding game" in Athens, Greece. Hong Xi's formula brought a brand-new competition experience to Chinese viewers; whereas the travel route was rich in culture spectacle and relevant to social interests⁶ at that time.

10.2 The "1+2+3" Model of Game Rules

The game altogether requires twelve people. Six of them directly join the contest at the start and the remaining six serve as substitutes. In the game six contestants are divided into three teams with one person, a pair and three members in each team (hence 1+2+3) who each undertake the same given task. The winning of the game was based on each individual contestant's accumulated points. Each contestant starts with a hundred points and is allowed to use his/her own points to bid the right for a grouping of the three teams for his/her own benefit (see graphic 1 & 2 in Figure 41). Each task is rewarded sixty points and the winning team shares equally sixty points according to the number of team members (see graphic 2 & 3 in Figure 41). The ritual of bidding happens before each run of the contest. The points that a contestant used to win the bidding would be given to the contestant who temporarily has the lowest points among the six contestants.

Every four runs, a contestant with the lowest points would be ousted from the competition and one of the six substitutes would fill the vacancy (see graphic 4 & 5 in Figure 41). The new contestant also takes over the points left by the eliminated contestant. After twenty-four runs of competitions in the domestic venue (along the domestic route of the Silk Road), the four contestants with the highest points

⁶ China won the right to hold 2008's Olympic Games in 2003

progressed through to the second part of the competition and competed for the championship and a ¥ 200,000 (about US\$ 25,000) cash prize in Athens.

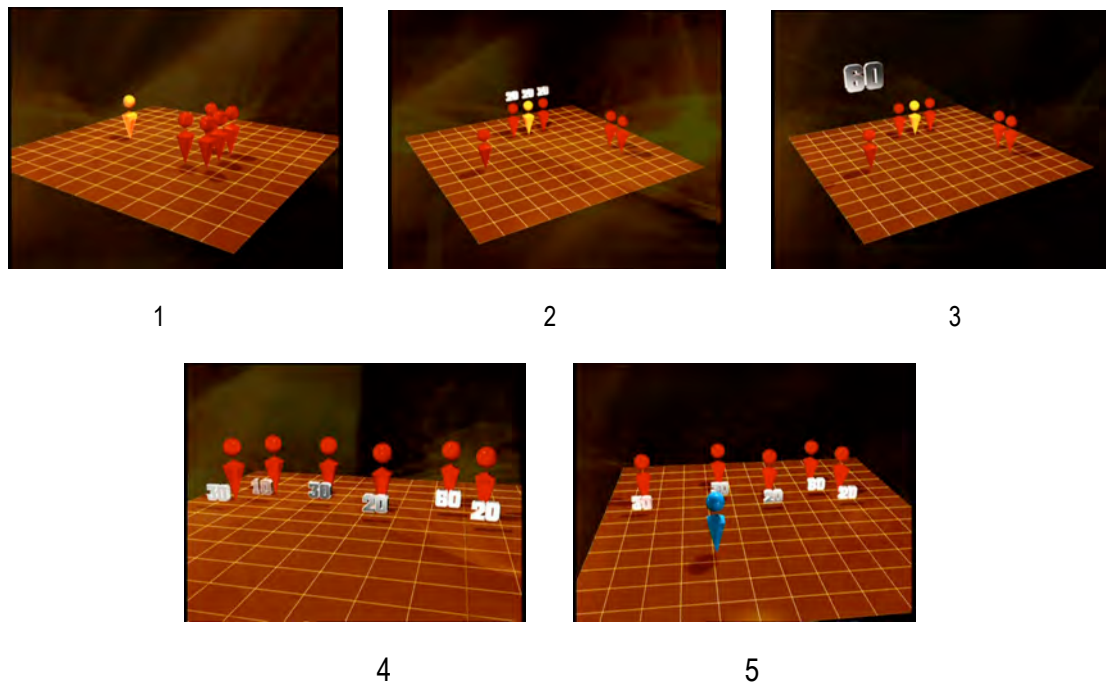


Figure 42 A twenty-second sequence of the instruction of the game rules

In order to assist audiences in quickly making sense of this complicated game system, a twenty-second sequence was repeatedly shown in each episode to explain the game rules (see Figure 42). CGI techniques were applied to vividly explain the principle of grouping and point counting through the movement of six chess-like cartoon images. Hong Xi's design strategically solved several key problems which had emerged in the localization of the Western *Survivor* format.

10.2.1 The Multi-Polarization of Competition

Hong Xi's design of the new game roles was based on a close look at both the *Survivor* and the previous seasons of *TGCFs*. The "1+2+3" formula involves a set of theoretical logics which were applied to innovate the conventional two-team competition model in three ways.

Firstly, the multi-polarization of competition mode complicates the relationship between the three teams and consequently the interactions among the six contestants involved in the game playing. The elimination system of the new *TGCFs* format was based on the accumulated points of individual contestants rather than the votes from teammates in a tribal council as the original *Survivor*. Compared with a two-team competition, individual contestants in this new game had a more complex situation to deal with and thereby his/her standpoint was subjected to considerable variation. According to scientific calculations, the formation of the teams could achieve sixty-four variables. With this number of possibilities, it was difficult to predict how the game would be ended, both by the programme maker and the viewer.

Secondly, the uneven number of the groups broke down the balance of the conventional competition mode. Based on the competition spirit of fair and justice and in considering the effects of suspense, the most commonly adopted competition mode in the majority of the contest-based programme followed the principle of being equal in number and comparable in strength. However, the design of the “1+2+3” model specially diversified the strength of the three teams. Carrying out the same survival task, the three teams each with a different size would adopt diverse strategies and face varied challenges during the competition.

Thirdly, the regrouping system replaced the normally fixed formation of the teams. The contestant were allowed to use their own points to bid for the rights of a regrouping of the teams before the start of each run. This competition mechanism encouraged a constant change in the team formations. Furthermore, this competition mechanism also forced a change of one member of the six contestants every four runs. After four runs of competition, the contestant who had the lowest point would be eliminated from the competition and a new member would join the competition. Such

arrangements further complicated the relationship between the contestants and minimized the possibility of forming a Chinese style “alliance”⁷.

10.2.2 Breaking up the Chinese-Style Alliance

In the *Survivor* format, one major reason for contestants aligning together is to make themselves stay in the game longer. Targeting an enormous cash prize, their unions are based more on a gaming strategy than friendship. Therefore, these alliances basically happened within a team. However, the members of the subgroups in the *TGCFs* often bonded through the solid friendships which developed during pre-production training. In the second and third season, in order to break up the potential alliances and make individual contestants compete with each other, the directors divided the members of the subgroups into two teams in the competition. However, the unfriendly living conditions, the *Survivor*-style game rules and the promised cash prize did not necessarily bring intense competition among those Chinese contestants. Contestants in different teams would continuously share their limited survival resource with their friends in the other team and even sacrifice themselves to avoid their friends being knocked out of the game. The Chinese-style alliance thereby was considered a disadvantage in generating any real sense of competition among the contestants in the two-team competition model. Hui Han, the chief director of the fourth season, mentions that

What I worried most was the contestant treating each other politely and being friendly. This would affect the authenticity of the competition, because they would not break these harmonious and friendly relationships [...]. The most unwanted situation was where all the contestants tightly bonded with each other (personal communication, August 14, 2006).

In the fourth season, Hong Xi attempted to utilize the new game rules to break up any Chinese-style alliances by spurring a competitive spirit among the Chinese

⁷ The examples of the second season and third season discussed in Chapter Seven relate to this point.

contestants. Both the individual-based point calculation system and the regrouping strategy encouraged contestants to develop a sense of competition. In order to stay in the game, a contestant had to ensure he/she earned higher points among the six contestants in the game. The regrouping strategy resulted in an instability of relationships among the six contestants in the game. Within twenty-four runs of competition along the Silk Road, the constantly changing constitution of the three teams forced the contestants to frequently switch their relationships from opponents to teammates. Therefore, a lack of common interest among the contestants in the new competition model led to the automatic collapse of any firm alliance between the teammates, as had happened in the previous two-team competition.

It is worth noting that although making the relationships between the contestants more dynamic for the purpose of minimizing the possibility of forming Chinese-style unions and mobilizing the contestants to be more engaged in the competition, the game rules were not designed to encourage a “cut-throat” competition among the contestants. Andrejevic (2004) argues that in *Survivor*, “human social relations are misrecognized and thereby portrayed as an inevitable consequence of unchangeable natural law” p.196). However, the version of human nature presented in *TGCF* was not merely competitive, selfish and Darwinian as in its Western origins (Andrejevic, 2004). Instead, the new game rules underlined Confucian values and socialistic ideologies to cater to an assumed Chinese cultural context and viewing habits.

10.2.3 Balancing Competition and Collaboration

In making a *Survivor*-like format in China, the programme makers had to deal with a contradiction in regards to the production approach to the Western-style competition. In order to make an appealing programme, on the one hand, the local producers expected an intense competition; on the other hand, they were concerned with any

possible wider social criticism for their foregrounding of the qualities of many contest-based Western reality programmes⁸. Public commentators noted that

Previously, ‘Reality TV’ programmes often emphasize confrontation and competition and follow the principle of survival of the fittest. This inevitably induced the dark side of human nature and scenarios like backstabbing and outwitting each other in a Darwinian struggle for survival. Obviously, this was neither consistent with Chinese traditional moral ethics, nor in accord with Chinese audience’s viewing ethics. (Fang & Ding, 2003)

As a production funded by a Party-state run television station, programme makers needed to be concerned how to carry out the competition to fulfil marketing needs as well as making it socially acceptable. It proved to be a challenging task for the local reality programme makers in their previous explorations. Hong Xi’s “1+2+3” model was specifically designed to solve this kind of cultural conflict by referencing a series of concepts in relation to China’s moral ethics and cultural background. Hong Xi argues that,

The Western reality format to a large extent is derived from the Western way of thinking. In the localization of the Western reality format, the producer needs to repackage and redesign the imported format according to the situation of the nation, the interests of the people and their preference of the competition form (personal communication, November 19, 2006).

The design of the new game rules attempted to balance the concept of competition and collaboration. The individual point calculation system provoked competition; whereas the point rewarding system encouraged collaboration, since the winning points of each run were shared by teammates. Contestants who were grouped into two-member and three-member teams were required to demonstrate a teamwork spirit. This kind of setup determined that among the six contestants, there could be both competition and collaboration in the game.

⁸ The examples of the crew members negotiating “voting-off” strategy in the second season and the authorities of GDTV changing the title of the third season mentioned in Chapter Nine demonstrate this point of view.

An understanding of the concept of competition and collaboration in the Chinese context can be discussed from two aspects. From a strategic perspective, Hong Xi argues that

The idea of competition and collaboration echoes the economic concept that competition and collaboration can be carried out simultaneously between rivals. It is like having a game of chess. The temporary 'weak' player can win back a set by wisely regrouping the three teams via winning the regrouping right in the next bidding (personal communication, November 19, 2006).

Here Chinese understanding of the competition was taken into account while developing the game rules. The "1+2+3" model of game formula demonstrated how the culturally-preferred competition model was applied in the game of the fourth season to present very different types of competition to that of its Western counterpart.

10.2.4 The Culturally-Preferred Competition Model

Generally speaking, Eastern and Western cultures have very different understandings about competition which results in a difference in interest in competition form. The West appear to appreciate the physical strength of a human being, whereas the East admires people who conquer difficulties through wisdom rather than mere physical power. Hong Xi explains that

Historically, Chinese people praise both intellectual pursuits and martial arts. The aspects of wisdom and physical strength should complement each other. Chinese people would not simply admire physical strength; even if a person solves the problem by using physical power [...]. According to the theory of Sunzi who is the famous ancient Chinese military strategist, the highest realm of the war is 'no war'. This conception reflects the mechanism of negotiation and coordination that has been widely applied in modern business administration (personal communication, November 19, 2006).

The idea of negotiation and coordination derives from the art of strategy which has more than two thousand years of history in China. From a Chinese philosophical perspective, the concept of strategy has an extensive meaning which involves the idea of using non-violent means to win a fight, solve a problem or take control of a situation. Applying this concept to the local gamedoc format, strategy refers to some dominant aspects other than physical strength, such as wisdom and character. These factors not only played a significant role in determining the popularity of each contestant, but also had a great influence on winning the game strategically, such as how to take advantage of regrouping and how to play up strength and avoid the appearance of weakness.

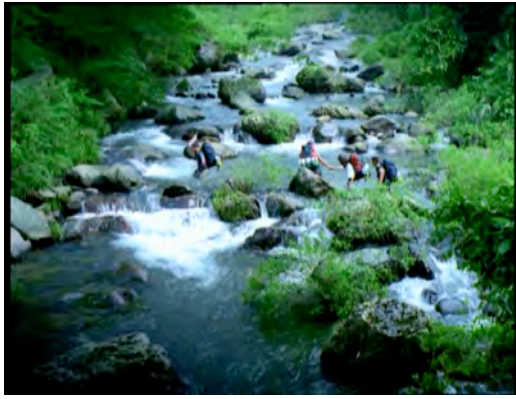
Moreover, the uneven number of the three teams and the gender differences of the contestants also determined that in order to create suspense the given tasks could not emphasise physical challenges. Throughout the series, the travel routine covers both city and countryside, both inhabited and remote areas. The competition ranged from organizing social and cultural events, experiencing local customs, running a small business and carrying out outdoor challenges (see Figure 43). The examination of the survival capability of contestant was comprehensive, including physical strength, intelligence, social ability, communication skills, business talent and willpower.



Arranging a shadow play for foreigners



Making and selling local food



Hiking in the valley



Collecting signatures for Beijing Olympics Game

Figure 43 Some contests in the 4th season

The situation presented in the reality format was therefore deliberately similar to social reality in which the available resources, opportunities and strengths of each social member and social groups are often not equivalent. Hong Xi commented in an interview with local newspaper that

Reality shows can borrow ideas from relationships in the real society, such as international relationships, regional relationships, industrial relationships and interpersonal relationships, to set up the game model. The new game rules aim to extend and upgrade the previous antagonistic-style game about challenging physical limits to a challenge of more profound aspects such as personal relationships, moral ethics and personalities. (Fang and Ding, 2003)

Since the winning of the game largely depended on accumulated points and the situation of each regrouping, an individual contestant's game strategy and interpersonal relationship seemed to play a more important role than his/her physical strength on many occasions. As a result, in this outdoor survival-based format, the physically weak contestants also had the opportunity to win the game if he/she could play the game wisely as well as 'nicely'.

10.2.5 The Unique Rescue System

The so-called “rescue system” was a distinctive feature of this locally-developed game rules, which was applied to encourage the contestants to demonstrate some socially-acclaimed traits. Hong Xi claims that

Instead of simply emphasising competition, this season is more concerned with social reality and moral ethics. The programme not only advocates the contestant to become a strong and virtuous person, but also encourages them to help the weaker ones and present sincere friendships (Fang and Ding, 2003) .

Although the foregrounding of friendship among the contestants in the second and third seasons was a headache for the crew, this element was welcomed in considering ethical issues and in processing an emotional approach.

The rule of bidding for regrouping rights provided an opportunity for the stronger contestant to help the weakest ones via directly transferring their bidding points to upgrade his/her temporally lowest position and/or wisely regrouping him/her into a strong team to win more points in the next run of the game. This kind of design not only enhanced the suspense of the game, but also complied with Chinese traditional moral ethics and audiences’ viewing habits. The “rescue system” could effectively change the situation that the less competitive contestants were more likely to be eliminated in the earlier stage of the game, as displayed in many other “survival of the fittest” formats. It also allowed the contestants to demonstrate their friendship without affecting their competitive consciousness.

One of the major contributions of the new game formula was that it promoted a kind of healthy competition. The unique game strategy provided good stories for the reality series. Presenting people helping each other and/or sacrificing their personal interests for the community’s good benefited the portrayal of a hero-like contestant. The design of the “1+2+3” model of game system addressed the concerns of both the competition and the production.

10.2.6 A Six-Member Contest Team

CBS's *Survivor* and GDTV's *TGCFs* have very different production scales and first-run broadcasting schedules. The central characters in each episode of the *Survivor* series created an emphasis on the elimination of candidates at the upcoming tribal council of the team who lost a game and on the key figures of the alliances in the winning team. It can be concluded that without an adequate number of cameras continuously following the contestants and without sufficient working time in processing through post-production, it was unlikely to achieve such a well-structured narrative.

From their learned experience from the second and third season that had twenty and twelve contestants respectively, the local producers realized that following the same number of the contestants as the *Survivor* format was not feasible in the *TGCFs* production. Due to the different production scale and the first-run broadcasting schedule of the *TGCFs* in comparison with *Survivor*, too many contestants would be problematic for the local production.

Although it seemed necessary to recruit at least a dozen of contestants to carry out weekly eliminations over a three-month competition, the much smaller sized filming crew (about twenty regular members) and shorter period for processing through post production (about two weeks) made the local programme maker feel that it was difficult to handle a relatively large number of contestants, in particular in the early stages of filming. With about three cameras serving for the local production and an average two-week time difference between the filming and the first-run screening, in the early stages of filming, both the on-location director and post-production director often struggled to identify and portray the “main character” among a number of contestants. As Post-production Director Jun Zeng argues (personal communication, July 28, 2006)

In the fourth season we summarized our experience that our format should not include too many contestants. Taking the second season as an example, it was impossible for the audience to remember all twenty contestants. When the audience started to get to know some contestant, it was probably the time for him/her to leave the game. In our format, six contestants would be a suitable number.

Even though there were altogether twelve participants involved in the game during the fourth season the number of people directly involved in the first twenty-four runs of competition was always six. Hong Xi believes that

This is the most reasonable formation of a contest team. This setup is according to the structure of the character in a television drama. Generally, a television drama mainly involves six characters, including the leading actor and actress, the supporting actor and actress, and two minor roles (a guest actor or walk-on). This kind of lineup not only can maintain the liveliness of a scene, but also guarantee that the viewer can remember at least one or two the main characters (Fang and Ding, 2003).

In terms of the order of the twelve contestants entering into the game, the decision making on the selection of the six members of the first team and the order of substitutes entering into the game was very cautious, because the local producers had recognized that contestants are the key to the success of a reality programme⁹. The director ensured a potentially popular contestant got a position in the first six-contestant team, to attract viewers to watch the programme from the start. Hong Xi analyzed that

The core of the reality programme is people and event. A competition made a group of common people worthy of attention. The setup of the competition is to display human nature. [...] Reality programmes contrive to present the conflicts of contestants in competition (personal communication, November 19, 2006).

⁹ This point is particularly discussed in Chapter Seven

Based on this kind of consideration, in the example of the composition of the six members of the first team, six contestants directly entered into the competition were candidates who had the most star quality and who also had diverse and divisive characters (see Figure 44). This kind of selection reflects many similarities with the production of a television drama¹⁰.



Figure 44 Six good-looking and fashionable contestants in the ritual of the departure in Xi-an

During the production of the fourth season, three sub-filming teams followed three teams and captured sufficient and valuable footage for the needs of the post-production team to construct narrative and portray characters. Post-production director Jun Zheng admits that

The insufficiency of audio-visual material for editing both in its quantity and quality was a serious problem in the postproduction of the second and the third season, but no longer a problem in the fourth season (personal communication, July 28, 2006).

In contrast, due to the restriction in the time duration of each episode, many interesting stories and valuable footage could not be included in the twenty-minute episode.

¹⁰ The foregrounding of dramatic effects in the reality programme making is examined in Chapter Six and casting for dramatic purposes is discussed in Chapter Seven.

To a large extent, how to efficiently apply the new game rules to the local format and make Hong Xi's theories work effectively in the production practice also depended on the professional commitment, collective wisdom and production experience of the local crew. Post production director Jun Zeng claimed that

This format was new for Chinese television professionals. The production team was the pioneer, we did not have a text book to learn from or follow. We identified problems from the previous production experience and sought out effective ways to solve the problems (personal communication, July 28, 2006).

Besides relying on the new game rules to solve some long existing problems which emerged in this localized format production, the crew also actively developed some new production strategies and polished their production and management skills to ensure the successful application of the new game rules in the production.

10.3 New Functions of Training

In this season, the *TGCFS* crew took full advantage of training during the preproduction period to break up the alliances and generate contestants' competitive spirit. The training system was formally introduced to the *TGCFS* format in the second season and was mainly set up to select candidates and prepare for the filming¹¹. The crew often employed a drillmaster from the army to design the tasks and govern the training. The major tasks included enhancing physical fitness, learning outdoor survival skills and getting used to be filmed (see Figure 45). Initially, the semi-military training was mainly designed to prepare for some difficulties that the participants were likely to encounter during the journey.

¹¹ The casting agenda and the initial motivation of setting up the preproduction training is discussed in Chapter Seven.



Figure 45 Some images of the training in the 4th season

In the fourth season, the crew learned to use the training as an opportunity to educate the candidates to fit their needs. During the ten-day training they emphasized two issues. One was the fact that there was competition among the candidates. The other was the rule that the production team's decision was indisputable. Such an approach aimed to solve the problems which emerged in the previous seasons. In order to make the production process smooth, the filming crew wanted to take control of the

production and of the contestants. During the preproduction training, candidates were willing to obey the orders of the crew, because they wanted access to the competition. Therefore this was a good chance for the crew to establish their authority.

In terms of building up and encouraging the game spirit of the candidates who often lack an intention for self-motivation, post-production director Jun Zeng who also acted as the manager of the training, stresses that “it was very important to plant a concept of competition into the mind of the candidate before they got to know each other and developed friendships” (personal communication, July 28, 2006). Learning lessons from their previous experience, the crew attempted to fix everything for their needs while participants were still strangers to each other. Chief Director Hui Han believes that “this is beneficial for the governance of the contestants” (personal communication, August 14, 2006).

In order to achieve their goal, the crew set a significant distinction between prize and punishment in the training. People who completed the task or won the game were fed very well. In contrast, people who failed the task or lost the game would have to go for a long run. The dramatic contrast in the treatment between the two groups made the candidates very eager to win their next challenge.

Hui Han argues that “it is important to let contestants get used to the hardship before the filming starts. One major problem for the third season was the contestants never imagined they had to experience hardship” (personal communication, August 14, 2006). The circumstances staged by the crew aimed to give mental preparation for the candidates before the start of the real survival challenge. Jun Zeng also points out that “it was very important for the candidates to get used to the fact that their teammates have to leave the team one by one sooner or later” (personal communication, July 28, 2006). During the training, some candidates who broke the rules or quit the intense training were sent home immediately. The farewell was deliberately staged to enhance an atmosphere of sadness. The production team believed that to conquer the

contestant's emotional weakness in dealing with their feelings of sadness was crucial for the encouragement of a competitive spirit.

Those arrangements were deployed for the purpose of reinforcing a sense of competition among the contestants and in the meantime effectively establishing the authority of the production team. As a result, after the carefully designed pre-production training, the contestants more easily accepted the fact that one of their teammates would have to leave the game in each run of elimination and were more respectful of the game rules set by the production team. The production of the fourth season testified that these strategies mentioned above worked as effectively as the programme makers had expected and also benefited the production team's efforts to maintain control during the filming.

10.4 Conclusion

This season's production indicates that in order to achieve the programme makers' expected outcome, some key problems of a Chinese style alliance, lack of game spirit and the cultural inadaptability of the Western style competition which emerged in the first three seasons, had to be solved through the design of new game rules to help the participants to engage into the contrived situation and via specially designed production methods to educate the participants in how to operate within a reality gameshow. The originality and creativity displayed in this local production was unique in Chinese reality programme making, in particular in the early 2000s. It signalled that the production team had become more competitive in reality programming and more sophisticated in the process of their filming. Hong Xi claims that

The distance in television programming between China and the West has been reduced. In fact, currently many television programme has passed the stage of imitation and actively entered into a stage of originality. Many

domestically-produced programmes contain a high level of originality (personal communication, November 19, 2006).

The “1+2+3” game formula and specific production techniques strategically prevented the Chinese-style alignment of contestants, effectively enhanced the competitiveness of individual contestants, and most importantly adapted to the Chinese cultural context and the specific production environment.

Among the six finished seasons with their variety of survival forms and production models, although the fourth season was not the most popular season, it is arguably the best production of all the seasons. The team members who were involved in the production of the fourth season are very proud of their achievements both in the process of filming and its production quality. The twelve selected contestants also demonstrated the best game spirit in the production’s history. It was reported that

According to CSM, the fourth season maintained about 3% audience ratings during its first run in the Guangdong television market. It secured a position in the top 30 among both local and internationally produced programmes of all kinds. This kind of higher and stable ratings is rare in the non-fiction genre which means this programme has nurtured its loyal audiences (*Nanfang Daily*, 2003).

The achievement of the fourth season is not only attributable to the design of the new game rules, but also relied on the application of the new game rules to the actual production context. The success of the reality format production to a large extent is rooted in the problem solving skills and executive capabilities of the production crew. However, the well-established new game rules and production methods were not continually applied to the productions of the later seasons of the *TGCFS*, because its achievements were not fully recognized by the authorities in GDTV. From a commercial perspective, this season neither surpassed the rating performance of the inaugural season, nor achieved a breakthrough in marketing sales.

In a domestic television market flooding with similar television outputs, it seems very difficult to rely on a good formula to rescue the drop of audience interests in the outdoor survival format. As a result, in the later seasons, the production crew was forced to continuously change their format and explore new ways to achieve a breakthrough in rating performance. However, the crew's endeavour failed to change the situation, because many diagnosed symptoms in relation to the management of the production, the mechanism of institutional structure and the immaturity of the Chinese television market were never resolved.

It is fair to say that the originality and creativity of the "1+2+3" format as well as the well-developed production model applied in the fourth season of the *TGCFS* represent a pinnacle of the Chinese outdoor survival format production. It signals that Chinese reality programme makers are capable of creating a culturally appropriate reality format and have great potential to achieve as high a standard of television production as their Western counterparts.

Chapter Eleven: Conclusion

In the last two decades, Chinese television has been continuously reducing its gap (in developing programming, integrating new technologies and developing relationships with audiences) with television in developed countries, such as the US, UK and Japan. Keane (2003) argues that “[m]any of the changes occurring in Chinese society are predictable, rational, and in accord with global transformations. This is certainly the case in point when considering China’s uptake of television formats” (p.89). By examining the first Chinese produced reality programme, it can be said that in the past decade, China has caught up on the global television trend in the post-WTO era. With Chinese television revenue now relying more on commercials than it does subsidies from the government, Chinese television “has adopted a market-driven operational strategy and become more innovative and flexible in its programmes in an effort to attract audiences and advertising revenue” (Wang, Liu & Fore, 2005, p.136).

The emergence of reality programmes can be viewed as one major outcome of Chinese television reforms. The significant changes of media environment in the reforming era match with the dramatic transformation of the *TGCFs* format and its production approach across six seasons. This production research on the behind-the-scenes agenda of the Chinese pioneer reality programme making reveals that new hybrid formats opened a new area for local television makers to exercise a variety of new approaches (drama, politics, commerce, co-production and multimedia collaboration), challenge established generic assumptions (documentary and drama), and enhance audience’s interaction with television media (through direct participation, polls and BBS).

It can be said that the commercialization of the television industry has led Chinese and Western television outputs to seem more alike, in particular entertainment programming outputs. However, the unique nature of Chinese media and industry also

reinforced some distinctive features of Chinese television products. Reality TV makes an interesting example to address differences resulting from China's unique production environment.

This chapter summarizes the findings of the production research and attempts to answer the research questions listed in Section 1.4 of Chapter One: Introduction. The major arguments of the thesis centre on the practice of *localization* in the *TGCFS* format making and the discussions carried out in three levels: production agenda, institutional environment and the broad transformation of Chinese television media. The distinctive features of the localized *TGCFS* format are explored in the examination of the origin of the *TGCFS* format, the generic confusion around documentary hybrid production, the role and experience of ordinary Chinese participants, the balance of political obligation and entertainment value, the application of principles of commercial operation, the development of an original game formula, and the continuous attempted improvement of the *TGCFS* production model.

As the pioneer Chinese reality production, the pan-Asian and later global influence on the emergence and development of the *TGCFS* format can be identified through two connections with the survival-based television formats Japanese *Airwave Boys* and American *Survivor*. With the increase of China's contact with Western media, Chinese television producers had been able to catch up with contemporary television trends. More importantly, in order to adapt to the distinctive Chinese situation and to cater to local audience interests, pioneer Chinese reality programme makers made considerable effort to innovate on the original format and to tailor it to the crew's specific production agenda.

Besides the significant cultural influence from overseas reality programmes, the *TGCFS* production was also strongly influenced by Chinese cultural preferences, mainstream ethical values and predominant socio-political ideologies. China's unique

culture and media have nurtured the specific viewing tastes and habits of Chinese television audiences as well as the unique working philosophy and methods of the local television makers.

The distinctive patterns displayed in this locally produced foreign reality format, in particular the outdoor-survival strand, are a reflection of the unprecedented changes taking place in contemporary China, emerging in such areas as the cultural landscape, social environment, political discourse and economic power. Six seasons of the *TGCFS* plus two extra examples (the planned seventh season and *Go To the West*) also provide a good coverage of various issues in regard to the significant transitions that have occurred in Chinese society over the past decade.

This case study reveals that the conventional documentary genre, in particular the established Chinese “special topic” programme had a strong influence on the emergence of Reality TV in China. As a result, crew members’ generic assumptions about “Reality TV” in China are revealed as a key aspect to be explored in the production research. This pioneer Chinese reality production provides a profile of the transition of conventional documentary to Reality TV in a Chinese context. The production agenda of the *TGCFS* suggests that Chinese Reality programme makers experienced generic confusion, in particular during the production of the earlier two seasons. Influenced by a strong documentary tradition, these Chinese reality programme producers often adopted documentary approaches and attempted to demonstrate a cultural and social-political discourse as “serious” documentary. The issue of how to balance their aesthetic perceptions and their new responsibility for a good ratings performance generated many debates among local producers on what could be considered the “appropriate” production methodology for making documentary hybrids. Nevertheless, with the *TGCFS* producer’s understanding of the nature of mass television production deepening each season, their conception of documentary hybrid making gradually leaned further and further towards fictional genres. Eventually, local programme makers’ willingness to follow conventional

documentary approaches had to yield to the nature of mass produced television by sacrificing the authenticity of the televisual content. This shift shared many patterns with the debates that have been carried out in Western academia and public commentaries for more than a decade.

Generally speaking, the prosperity of reality programmes can be viewed as an outcome of the broader entertainment orientation of television programming. In the past decade, entertainment programme makers have been among the more adventurous television professionals; pushing boundaries, exploiting unexplored territory and shaping viewers' values. In contemporary China, all television genres more or less contribute to delivering entertainment to the mass audience. This studied case is a typical example of "special topic" programme makers introducing entertainment elements and later applied commercial practice to factual-based programming.

The phenomenon identified in this Chinese case study suggests that this nation's factual outputs also shares patterns with their Western counterparts. China is possibly moving into what Corner described as a "post-documentary culture" era in which conventional documentary genre is continuously expanding and developing into more entertainment-oriented forms. The result is that documentary hybrid formats proliferate and become a new television category which aims to provide mass distraction.

In a growing commercialized production environment, these Chinese television makers demonstrated their capability of quickly adapting to the new cultural climate and becoming more concerned with market needs. As Li (2001) has argued, "while audience ratings were never especially important in the past, they have recently become the dominant factor for TV programming decisions' (p.5). This production research reveals that in the post-WTO period, this factor became the driving force steering the *TGCFS* production approach gradually to moving closer to its Western

commercial counterparts. This phenomenon can be attributed to the changing Chinese media landscape since the mid 1990s.

To a large extent, a series of modifications of the *TGCFs* format mirror the changing landscape of the Chinese television industry. The ups and downs of the outdoor survival format in Chinese television market in the early 2000s suggests that the popularity and prevalence of this particular documentary hybrid strand at that time is closely associated with the specific Chinese cultural environment; with socio-political changes and economic development taking place at the beginning of the new millennium.

It is argued that the emergence of an outdoor sport culture contributed to the boom of the outdoor survival format in China in the beginning of the new millennium. The interconnection of Chinese reality television and social interests also can be explored from the subject of the format and its participants. This research reveals that the emerging Chinese urban middle class has a strong connection to the outdoor survival format. They are not only the preferred target audience, but also the producers' preferred participants.

Those participants held a great deal of power within the production of the *TGCFs* format. Their experience and responses to the new media experience not only became an important aspect to discussing the distinctive features of Chinese reality programme, but also reflect social attitudes towards the outdoor format. Some issues discussed in this thesis, such as a lack in game spirit and avoidance of the camera, demonstrate the great differences between the presentation of Chinese and American participants in CBS's *Survivor*. However, this unique scenario also changes with the proliferation of reality formats in China. Young Chinese participants in the later seasons of *TGCFs* series seem more Westernized in presentation. The research suggests that the emergence of reality programming opens a new field of media presentation while educating participants themselves on how to operate in reality

production, and how to engage with a fact-fiction text.

This long-lasting reality production allows an examination of the struggles and efforts that these Chinese television producers experienced and contributed according to the changes of the media environment. The launch of the *TGCFS* series in 2000 was the year that GDTV started to fight to gain back a long lost local television market from competing foreign television channels, in particular from Hong Kong television. The studied case is the GDTV's response to being further marginalized in local ratings in the post-WTO period. From early 2000 up to 2006, the *TGCFS* crew made unremitting efforts to explore a way to allow a localized globally popular television format access to the television mainstream. However, the multi-function nature of being a political unit, cultural instructor and business enterprise embodied by GDTV determined that these local television practitioners had to deal with a highly complex set of practices and dynamic relationships between political frameworks, social responsibilities and commercial imperatives in re-making globally controversial "Reality TV" formats.

In their production history, the *TGCFS* producers were challenged to achieve their dual goals of exploring entertainment value and accomplishing political imperatives. They are also responsible for balancing commercial imperatives and the changing institutional environment. In the process of modifying their production approach, local producers had to continuously test boundaries of cultural and ethical norms in order to find a breakthrough in ratings performance.

Although the process of commercialization has lagged behind that of Western commercial television, the local programme makers' desire for acquiring and leveraging commercial practices was no less than those of Western commercial television makers. However, this research has also identified that, in this Chinese case, the competition for ratings initially involves a different context. In Western commercial practice, ratings are more closely associated with revenue building;

whereas in this local case, the programme maker's attitude towards ratings engaged more complex concerns.

In beginning of this century, Reality TV has remained a staple of low-budget programming around the world. Low production costs seems to be one of the major reasons for its success. However, this has not been the case in Mainland China. In order to enhance its reputation and foster more loyalty from audiences, GDTV continuously increased the investment of *TGCFs* in packaging the reality production as a large-scale and big-budget production to attract public attention. This kind of approach reflects the efforts of the operators of GDTV to develop a basic market savvy while addressing the new challenges brought by an intensified competition for audiences nationwide.

Being an integral part of the television station, the production crew also developed a commercial consciousness, absorbed many marketing skills from overseas commercial television¹ and were willing to commit to achieving a ratings success. Many examples discussed in this thesis suggest that these programme makers and their investors (which here refer to the officials of GDTV) shared a common goal, in terms of appealing to a large audience. They expected that this kind of practice could strengthen their capability for competing for a local market share and hence generating advertising revenue in an increasingly commercialized domestic television market. However, during the exploration of the marketing potentials of entertainment television programming, the *TGCFs* crew members often suffered from a lack of a sophisticated marketing plan and well-developed operational model. More importantly, those reality programme makers who are subjected to Party-state run television station had to face a complex production environment while creating a globally popular reality format within a Chinese media context.

¹ Overseas influence is mainly from the US, UK and some East Asian countries and regions, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea.

The *TGCFS* producer too often concentrated on the appeal of ratings for the purpose of continuously receiving funds from the television station and/or commercial sponsors. The crew were devoted to enhancing the brand influence of their “non-profitable” big budget production and overlooked the importance of generating profits. However, with the deepening of commercialization in nationalized media institutions, this local reality programme making eventually fell into the same loop as many of its Western counterparts. The self-financing system promoted in the post WTO era has encouraged the manager of a television station to be enterprising in order to improve its economic strength. Without a commercial sponsor to invest in the seventh season in 2007, the *TGCFS* crew had to face the fate of dropping the planned production project.

The problems and obstacles encountered in the making of the *TGCFS* format have been shared by many state-run television stations which were facing a significant transformation in the post-WTO era. Keane (2003) claims that “[a]lthough business logic drives the thinking of many of the new breed of broadcasters [...] the competitive ethic has not magically transformed China’s media into centres of innovation” (p.94). I would argue that this pattern is not entirely applicable to this single case study. This research provided a more enlightened perspective of cultural borrowing. In the example of the *TGCFS* production, the practice of cultural borrowing often involved a serious consideration to creating a distinctive and culturally appropriate difference. Programme makers were also keenly aware that to be the pioneer involves both risk and opportunity. The Chinese imitation of *Big Brother* failed while the Chinese spin-off of the *Survivor* format survived for many years. The *Airway Boys* format still can be found on domestic television screens. The localized variants of a global format are still being produced. The Travel Channel² recently aired a 15-episode series titled *Hitchhiking to Berlin*³ (*Dache quvbolin*)

² It was originally called Hainan Satellite TV. This provincial satellite channel markets itself as a specialist channel which focuses on broadcast programme relating to the subject of travel.

³ The director is one of the members who documented as well as accompanied another participant to exercise this unique way of travelling to Berlin to meet his girl friend. There was no *Airway Boys* –style “prank”.

(2010). It featured two Chinese young men taking three months to hitchhike to Berlin. However, in contrast from a decade ago, this programme catered to a narrow market niche of educated people who enjoy documentary and travel.

As Dovey (2000) argues, “[t]he logic of competition and commodification in television productions leads not to diversity but to homogeneity of programme type” (p.170). The low-risk strategies adopted by programme makers in the development of new formats have resulted in an excessive recycling of tried and tested formulas. In terms of the GDTV team, being the pioneer reality programme makers in Mainland China gave them a great opportunity to achieve commercial success and to build a reputation in the domestic television market. However, there were also potential risks of market failure and social criticism that needed to be taken into account.

Throughout the production history of the *TGCFs* series, the producers struggled to work out an ideal formula and develop the best production methods to obtain their goals of enhancing entertainment value, achieving a higher production quality and receiving a favourable social response. The launch of the original “1+2+3” formula in the fourth season of the *TGCFs* series demonstrates the creativity of the production crew and the high production quality that the GDTV could achieve after years of practice in reality programme making and format designing.

Nevertheless, this well-developed original formula was unable to fundamentally change the situation where this kind of format was losing attraction in the domestic television market. Although the *TGCFs* producers never gave up trying to achieve their goals, the environment changed faster than their progress could manage. It can be said that many of the issues which emerged from this research were far beyond the control of the production team. Although many production crew members recognized the problems that arose in the production process, it was very difficult for them to perform multiple tasks in order to fulfil the needs of the audience, to satisfy the

requirement of the authorities and to achieve their own professional goals. This field research reveals that the crew members were often working in a highly stressed environment during filming. Each member often had to take multiple roles in the filming, and their huge work load obviously affected the efficiency of their production.

All the evidence presented in this thesis indicates that the commercialization of the television industry has lagged behind the demands of the local market. What is missing in this local reality production is an industrial chain. There is a limited number of production-centred crew available to undertake such work, which usually requires at least double the number of personnel with expertise across the entire industrial chain, from creating the format to distributing the final product. This in the end appears to be the weakest aspect of the team. The open call for a quality production plan in the fourth season and the commitment to a collaboration were aimed at strengthening their weakest links. Comments elicited by the leader of the production⁴ relate to this point. However, I also would argue that quality programming, sophisticated filming techniques and polished narrative skills did not necessarily bring ratings success. The fourth season of *TGCFS* demonstrated a good example of this situation.

Although *TGCFS* ended after the completion of its sixth season in 2005, its unique production history and collective production experience have currency for the understanding of the production practice of Chinese reality programme. Their experiences provide a basis for further study of Chinese reality formats and more broadly of contemporary Chinese television.

Due to a lack of academic studies on Chinese Reality TV and the narrow perspectives of considering the new television phenomenon in China, the production approach of

⁴ Chun Yan assumes that “if GDTV could be like *Survivor* that is operated by an enterprise, *TGCFS* would achieve a better market performance, suspense and live broadcasting effects” (personal communication, August 23, 2006).

this study relied on some Western theoretical frameworks in examining this phenomenon. Corner's post-documentary speculation, Dovey's perception on "media democracy" and various foreign studies on the localization of globally popular reality format in different cultural context have inspired my thinking towards the emergence and development of Reality TV in contemporary China.

As Murray and Ouellette (2009) found in their study on Reality TV in Latin America, the local (Chinese) culture had a strong influence on the shaping of content of the *TGCFs* format. In a heavily regulated Chinese national television industry, the globalized practices of television making have meant the increased development of entertainment formats for the nationwide audience, but without any corresponding freedom on the ideological front. In fact, as discussed in Chapter Eight, this popular reality format was used to fulfil the political obligations of the state operated television institution. Here a ratings friendly television format was treated by the channel as a means of shaping more socially accepted forms of nationalistic messages.

This Chinese case study, however, differed from the 'multicountry' reality productions outlined in Jacobs' (2007) study on the *Big Brother Africa* phenomenon and Volcic & Andrejevic's (2009) research on the case of the Balkan version of *Big Brother*, which had to deal with conflicts in national interests and an imbalance of political-economic circumstances within their respective regions. The mixture of participants from different regions and countries in the studied Chinese case was motivated instead on promoting the local format as an international attraction and stressed the idea of the peoples of the Great China sharing common cultural origins.

It can be said that both Chinese television producers and political elites who were actively involved in the globalization of television in the post-WTO area attempted to treat the new television format as a tool to enrich national television outputs *and* generate revenue without shaking the political foundation and cultural norms.

Together with many other studies on the localization and regionalization of the popular reality formats in different geographic regions (as mentioned in section 3.2.3), this research on the emergence of reality television in Mainland China suggests that these new television formats have become an important means of evaluating the various degrees of participation of globalization practices in the post-WTO era. In the Chinese case, the emergence of Reality TV in the 2000s in part demonstrates Chinese television makers' anxieties in the face of competition from their domestic and international competitors.

The study on the *TGCFS* series also reflects the progress of a form of media democracy, in terms of the opening of a media space for ordinary people to present themselves. Conversely, however, it also narrowly addressed the values and interests of the emerging Chinese middle class. It can be argued that this was one of the major reasons why the *Survivor* style format could not replicate its phenomenal North American success. What the popular talent contest shows such as *Super Girls* (HNSTV, 2005-) promote is the rise of an increasingly significant "grass-root culture" (Sa & Yang, 2006). They provide a platform for females of all ages, regardless of their social strata, occupation and appearance.

The slogan "Singing if you want" ("xiang chang jiu chang") displays an attitude of showing the self and being confident which resonates with the new Chinese generation who have different dreams and more Westernized ideals than their seniors and parents. These factors led to the massive success of *Super Girls* which, to a large extent, also reflects problems embedded in the outdoor survival format, in terms of being isolated from social reality and working against socially acclaimed values. In the last decade, the Chinese government has been heavily promoting socialist harmony. However, what *Survivor* presented, in Andrejevic's (2004) words, is a televisual demonstration of "office politics" (p.202). This concept highlights the conflict of interests between the two cultural forces shaping contemporary China. *Super Girls* as a successful local adaptation, strategically turned "office politics" into

“sisterhood”. The foregrounding of the friendship between these contestants in the portrayal of the competition created a successful model to be widely cloned in other contest-based shows.

More importantly, *Super Girls* for the first time has allowed the viewer to vote for the winner. It is a testimony to a kind of public voting which signals a narrowly defined sense of 'democracy' emerging in Chinese television media. With the phenomenal success of the *Super Girls* nationwide, their voting strategy was soon replicated by other Chinese television programme makers. Chinese viewers have exercised public voting in various contest format programmes in the last five years. Moreover, Reality TV has provided a stage for Chinese ordinary people to present themselves to the national audience. They are encouraged to more openly share their thoughts and express themselves in the public space. Although this kind of practice, significantly, is mainly carried out in light entertainment programme, it can be perceived that the conception of democracy was unconsciously implanted into the mind of Chinese residents. Compared with ordinary people in the reality programmes made in the early 2000s, Chinese participants, in particular young people, seem more comfortable to expressing themselves in front of the camera in various newly made factual-based programmes. The contribution of Reality TV would be crucial in the process of achieving a form of media democracy in China television broadcasting.

Moreover, the evolution of the *TGCFs* format proved that the idea of living in a fictional scenario, of going “back to basics” in an isolated location, as in the sixth season, was no longer appealing to the mass audience. The popularity of business, talent, life style and dating reality formats in the past five years indicates local producers have become more rational in budget control and more sophisticated in revenue generation. Most of the productions have now been moved back from the natural environment to the studio, while the use of celebrities has been a short cut for grabbing audience attention. The Chinese version of *Dancing with Stars* (Dragon TV, 2007-2009) attracted many celebrity participants from Mainland China, Hong Kong

and Taiwan.

More recently, other Western-derived popular factual formats have emerged in the local market to give Chinese viewers brand-new television experiences. Popular formats include the Chinese spin offs of the *Apprentice* format, *Super Nanny* format, *Dancing with Stars* format, and most recently *Chinese Got Talent* (Dragon TV, 2010-). After years of marketing testing, exploration and expansion, reality programming has become a staple of Chinese television output and has been able to continuously attract strong audiences in the domestic television market, even in competition with popular drama and other long-established factual-based genres such as talk shows, news magazine programmes, life style shows and documentary.

All in all, Chinese Reality TV is a massive topic which covers various aspects of contemporary China's television making, socio-political reforms and their relationship to processes of globalization. What has been presented here is a group of highlighted aspects that mostly fit to the argument and the length of this thesis. There was also much valuable material gathered from this production research that had be left for further studies, such as issues of media liberation, format trading, media censorship and so on.

The *TGCFs* is a paradigmatic example of a Chinese television maker localizing the outdoor-survival format. More recently, the development of reality television in China has also reflected a tendency towards variety and diversity both in its format and content. The prosperity of Reality TV market in China has opened a brand new field and provided many interesting research topics for Chinese scholars to study these highly socially relevant forms of television programming.

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Interview:

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- Han, Hui, private interview, August 14, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 2 hours.
- Hou, Xiangke, private interview, June 20, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1 hour.
- Hu, Weibing, private interview, August 28, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1 hour.
- Huang, Hong, private interview, May 31, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1.5 hours.
- Huang, Hong, private interview, June 1, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1 hour.
- Huang, Hong, private interview, June 2, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 0.5 hour.
- Huang, Hong, private interview, June 7, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1 hour.
- Huang, Hong, private interview, June 13, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 0.5 hour.
- Huang, Hong, private interview, June 16, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 0.5 hour.
- Huang, Hong, private interview, June 19, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1 hour.
- Huang, Hong, private interview, July 11, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1 hour.
- Huang, Hong, private interview, July 12, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1 hour.
- Huang, Hong, private interview, August 25, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1.5 hours.
- Huang Jinping, private interview, August 22, 2006, Shenzhen, China, 2 hours.
- Li, Xiaoming, private interview, November 30, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 2.5 hours.
- Lin, Tao, private interview, July 9, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 0.5 hour.
- Lin, Tao, private interview, July 11, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1 hour.
- Liu, Min, private interview, July 15, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1 hour.
- Liu, Min, private interview, July 20, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1 hour.
- Liu, Dongxia, private interview, August 1, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1.5 hours.
- Lü, Dao, private interview, August 14, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 2.5 hours.
- Sun, Xüyang, private interview, December 11, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 3 hours.

Wang, Yin, private interview, September 1, 2006, Shanghai, China, 2.5 hours.

Wu, Jie, private interview, July 25, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 2.5 hours.

Xu, Liang, private interview, August 1, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 2 hours.

Xi, Hong, private interview, November 19, 2006, Beijing, China, 2 hours.

Yang, Fang, private interview, November 22, 2006, Beijing, China, 1.5 hours.

Zeng, Jun, private interview, July 28, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 3.5 hour.

Zhang, Fuqiang, private interview, July 24, 2006, Shenzhen, China, 3.5 hours.

Zhang, Jun, private interview, November 18, 2006, Beijing, China, 3.5 hours.

Zhao, Jian, private interview, August 9, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 3.5 hours.

Zhu Qingtong, private interview, August 22, 2006, Shenzhen, China, 2 hours.

Zhu, Zhiping, private interview, June 5, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1 hour.

Zhu, Zhiping, private interview, June 14, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 0.5 hour.

Zhong, Wenhui, private interview, August 23, 2006, Guangzhou, China, 1.5 hours

Zhu, Qiaotong, private interview, August 22, 2006, Shenzhen, China, 1.5 hours.

Television Programme:

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[TV-Series]. China: GDTV
- (2001). *Earth Story (Diqiu gushi)* [TV-Series]. China: CCTV2
- (2001 -). *Pop Idol* [TV-Series]. UK: ITV
- (2001 -). *Pop Stars* [TV-Series]. UK: ITV
- (2001 -). *Survivor* [TV-Series]. USA: CBS
- (2002 -). *24* [TV-Series]. USA: Fox
- (2004 - 2006). *NZ Idol* [TV-Series]. NZL: TV2
- (2004 -). *Quest China (Chaoji Nüsheng)* [TV-Series]. US: House Film
- (2004 -). *Super Girls (Chaoji Nüsheng)* [TV-Series]. China: HNSTV

- (2004 -). *Wise Man Takes it All (Chuangzhi Yinjia)* [TV-Series]. China: Shanghai Dragon TV
- (2005 -). *Deformation Story (Bianxin ji)* [TV-Series]. China: Shanghai HNSTV
- (2006). *First Heartbeat (Diyici xingdong)* [TV-Series]. China: CQTV
- (2006). *The Long March (Changzheng)* [TV-Series]. China: CCTV
- (2006). *My Long March (Wo de Changzheng)* [TV-Series]. China: CCTV
- (2006). *Rekindling the Long March Route (Xinghuo changzheng lu)* [TV-Series]. China: Shanghai TV
- (2007). *Date with Beauty (Meilai Meili Xin Yue)* [TV-Series]. China: GDTV
- (2008). *Into Shangri-La (Zouru Xianggelila)* [TV-Series]. China: Vhand
- (2002 - 2003) *I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!* [TV-Series]. UK: ITV

Appendix 1: The Synopsis of the Studied Productions

- **The First Season of TGCFS - Tracing China Overland Border (*Chuan yue gu jing xian*) (GDTV, July 2000-January 2001)**

This series recorded one girl and two young men selected from about five hundred volunteers in Guangzhou and Beijing taking up a survival challenge. Within six months, three participants were required to trace the 38,000 kilometre-long overland border with a mere ¥ 4000 (about US\$ 500) per person. This season was modelled on the Japanese reality show *Airwave Boys*. The series achieved an average 5% ratings share. This series was presented as a regular 10 minute segment of a magazine programme, called the *Pearl River, (Xiangju Zhujiang)* (1998-)

- **The Second Season of TGCFS - Retracing the Long March Route (*Chongzou changzheng lu*) (GDTV, July 2001-October 2001)**

This season became an independent production, and attracted more than 3000 people applying for participation. Eventually twenty contestants were selected from many countries (including Hong Kong) to spend four months retracing the route of the Red Army's Long March. *Survivor* elements such as a two-team competition, periodical eliminations and a tribal council were introduced into the established travel-based formula and a political context was also integrated into this production project. Eventually, eight contestants made it to the finishing point, Huining. The average rating for this season was 3% of the local audience.

- **The Third Season of TGCFS – Heroines cross Heave Pass (*Jinguo chuang tianguan*) (GDTV, July 2002-October 2002)**

Twelve urban young girls were recruited from more than 2000 volunteers to compete for a ¥200,000 (about US\$ 25,000) cash reward by surviving in a three-stage competition in both domestic and overseas locations. In the first month, contestants were divided into two groups to carry out *Survivor*-style challenges on the beach of Tianning Island, in Saipan. In the second month, the eight survivors were re-grouped

into two teams to hitchhike along the Yellow River in China. The four remaining contestants later made their way to New Zealand. They hitchhiked across the South and North Islands with NZ\$200 over a month and two of them made it to the final run. The finale was staged in Saipan and the winner was voted by other contestants and local journalists who reported on this media event. The reported ratings of this season averaged about 4%.

- **The Fourth Season of *TGCFS – Brave Travel across History (Si chou gu dao & Ju zhan ya dian)* (GDTV, July 2003-October 2003)**

Twelve participants were carefully chosen from 3000 thousand ordinary people to attend the competition. Six of them were divided into three groups (termed a “1+2+3” model by the producer) to carry out competitions during their journey along the route of the Silk Road. Every four runs, the participant with the lowest number of points was replaced by one of another six standby contestants. Four survivors after twenty-four runs of eliminations flew to Greece to compete for the ¥200,000 RMB cash prize. The average ratings were similar to the third season, which was around 4%.

- **The Fifth Season of *TGCFS - Hero on the Way (Ying xiong gu dao)* (GDTV & Vhand Culture & Media Co., July 2004-October 2004)**

GDTV coproduced this season with Beijing-based media company Vhand Culture Communication Co., Ltd. This season attracted 2000 young people competing for fourteen positions in the game. The contestants were grouped into pairs (one male and one female) to play games in which three teams pursued a “tag team” in various geographic locations (forest, desert, plateau, mountain, etc) in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the northwest of China. The final two teams challenged the 7,000 metre high Muztagata Mountain with the assistance of mountain climbing experts. The winner was rewarded with a golden cup. The average rating of this season dropped to at least 1%.

- **The Sixth Season of *TGCFS - Hero under the Heaven (Tian xia Ying xiong)***

(GDTV & GZTV, July 2005-October 2005)

GDTV coproduced this season with another provincial television station, Guizhou Television Station, and collaborated with a portal website 21CN.com. The crew received about 2000 applications from potential contestants. Altogether eighteen pairs of mixed gender were organised into two streams. One stream was sent to a beach in an isolated peninsula in Guangdong, while the other stream struggled for survival in a valley in Guizhou Province in the middle of the continent. Two pairs who survived the tribal council and audience voting in each location after a month of competition could progress to Canada to complete the second half of the competition, a thirty-day journey in an English-speaking country. The final competition was set at the Arctic Circle where one couple won the ¥300,000 prize. The ratings for this season ranged from 1% to 3%.

- ***Go to the West Following the Footprint of the Master Monk Xuan Zhang (abbr. Go to the West)(Chongzou Xuan Zang xixing lu) (GDTV, July 2006-February 2007)***

This series featured two Buddhist monks and 6 "ordinary people" carrying out the four month journey made by a famous Buddhist Monk Xuan Zang in 628 AD. Eight contestants travelled across the province of Shan Xi, Gan Su and Xinjiang in China, Pakistan, Nepal and eventually arrived to the final determination in India. The project was ratified by the State Administration for Religious Affairs of the P.R.C. This production project was promoted as a large-scale international media event about cultural exchange rather than a reality show by the event organizer.

- **The planned Seventh Season of *TGCFS - Suo Xiang Wn Di* (GDTV, 2006)**

This production plan was designed to be the first Chinese military-based reality programme for educating audiences on national defense. It was intended to feature 80 to 100 soldiers selected from different troops of People's Liberation Army (PLA) competing in forms of information-based virtual war games. However, this project did not make it to the stage of filming .

Appendix 2: Interview List

(All times are approximate)

● The First Season (2000)

- Mr. Sun, Xuyang Chief Supervisor
(December 11, 2006, Guangzhou, 2.5 hours)
- Mr. Zhao, Jian Chief Producer (August 9, 2006, Guangzhou, 2.5 hours)
- Mr. Huang, Hong Director/Camera Operator
(May 31, 2006, Guangzhou, 1.5 hours)
(June 1, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)
(June 2, 2006, Guangzhou, 0.5 hour)
(June 7, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)
(June 13, 2006, Guangzhou, 0.5 hour)
(June 16, 2006, Guangzhou, 0.5 hour)
(June 19, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)
(July 11, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)
(July 12, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)
(August 25, 2006, Guangzhou, 1.5 hours)
- Mr. Han, Hui Director/Camera Operator (August 14, 2006, Guangzhou, 2 hours)
- Mr. Li, Xiaoming Producer (November 30, 2006, Guangzhou, 2.5 hours)
- Mr. Zhu, Zhiping Producer (June 5, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)
(June 14, 2006, Guangzhou, 0.5 hour)
- Mr. Fang, Hui Postproduction Director/Editor/Composer
(July 21, 2006, Guangzhou, 2 hours)
- Mr. Zen, Jun Postproduction Director/Editor/Preproduction Training Manager
(July 28, 2006, Guangzhou, 3.5 hours)
- Ms. Xu, Liang Host/Narrator (August 1, 2006, Guangzhou, 2 hours)
- Mr. Lü, Dao Participant (August 14, 2006, Guangzhou, 2.5 hours)
- Ms. Wang, Yin Participant (September 1, 2006, Shanghai, 2.5 hours)
- Mr. Zhang, Jun Participant (November 18, 2006, Beijing, 3.5 hours)

● The Second Season (2001)

- Mr. Sun, Xuyang Chief Supervisor
- Mr. Zhao, Jian Chief Producer
- Mr. Huang, Hong Chief Director/Camera Operator
- Mr. Han, Hui Director/Camera Operator
- Mr. Li, Xiaoming Producer
- Mr. Zhu, Zhiping Producer
- Mr. Wu, Jie Director/Camera Operator
(July 25, 2006, Guangzhou, 2.5 hours)

Mr. Shi, Kun Camera Operator (July 15, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)
Mr. Lin, Tao Camera Operator (July 9, 2006, Guangzhou, 0.5 hour)
(July 11, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)
Mr. Fang, Hui Editor
Mr. Zen, Jun Editor
Ms. Xu, Liang Narrator
Mr. Hou, Xiangke Participant
Ms. Huang, Jinping Participant (August 22, 2006, Shenzhen, 1.5 hours)
Mr. Zhu, Qiaotong Participant (August 22, 2006, Shenzhen, 1.5 hours)

● **The Third Season (2002)**

Mr. Sun, Xuyang Chief Supervisor
Mr. Huang, Hong Production Supervisor
Mr. Han, Hui Chief Director
Mr. Wu, Jie Executive Director
Mr. Zhu, Zhiping Producer
Mr. Lin, Tao Camera Operator
Mr. Shi, Kun Camera Operator
Mr. Zen, Jun Editor
Ms. Liu, Dongxia Editor (August 1, 2006, Guangzhou, 1.5 hours)
Mr. Fang, Hui Composer
Mr. Hou, Xiangke Trainer/Production Assistant
Mr. Hu, Weibing Reporter of *Guangdong TV Weekly*
(August 28, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)

Ms. Liu, Min Participant (the Champion)
(July 15, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)
(July 20, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)
Ms. Li, Lin Participant (July 20, 2006, Guangzhou, 1.5 hour)
Ms. Liu, Lu Participant (November 19, 2006, Beijing, 2 hours)

● **The Fourth Season (2003)**

Mr. Yan, Chun Chief Supervisor (August 23, 2006, Guangzhou, 1.5 hours)
Mr. Huang, Hong Production Manager
Mr. Han, Hui Chief Director
Mr. Xi, Hong Production Consultant (November 19, 2006, Beijing, 2 hours)
Mr. Zhu, Zhiping Producer
Mr. Wu, Jie Executive Director/Camera Operator
Mr. Lin, Tao Executive Director/Camera Operator
Mr. Shi, Kun Executive Director/Camera Operator
Mr. Liang, Zhaowei Camera Operator
(July 28, 2006, Guangzhou, 1.5 hours)

Mr. Qin, Jian Camera Operator (June 2, 2006, Guangzhou, 1.5 hours)
Ms. Xu, Liang Host
Mr. Zen, Jun Editor
Ms. Liu, Dongxia Editor
Mr. Hou, Xiangke Trainer/Production Assistant
(June 20, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)
Mr. Tan, Xiao Participant (the Champion)
Mr. Zhang, Fuqiang Participant (July 24, 2006, Shenzhen, 3.5 hours)

● **The Fifth Season (2004)**

Mr. Yan, Chun Chief Supervisor
Ms. Yang, Fang Director Assistant (Vhand)
(November 22, 2006, Beijing, 1.5 hours)
Mr. Huang, Hong Executive Director
Mr. Han, Hui Executive Director
Mr. Zhu, Zhiping Producer
Mr. Liang, Zhaowei Camera Operator
Mr. Qin, Jian Camera Operator
Ms. Zhong, Zhen Editor (August 23, 2006, Guangzhou, 2 hours)
Ms. Zhong, Wenhui Reporter of *Guangdong TV Weekly*/Writer
(August 23, 2006, Guangzhou, 1.5 hours)
Mr. Hou, Xiangke Trainer/Production Assistant
Mr. Wang, Changcheng Participant (the Champion)
(August 22, 2006, Shenzhen, 2.5 hours)
Mr. Bi, Wanchun Participant (August 22, 2006, Shenzhen, 1.5 hours)

● **The Sixth Season (2005)**

Mr. Yan, Chun Chief Supervisor
Mr. Huang, Hong Production Supervisor
Mr. Han, Hui Director
Mr. Wu, Jie Director
Mr. Zhu, Zhiping Producer
Mr. Lin, Jian Producer
Mr. Lin, Tao Post production Director
Mr. Shi, Kun Executive Director/ Camera Operator
Mr. Lin, Tao Executive Director/ Camera Operator
Mr. Zhu, Xiaotong Trainer/Production Assistant
Mr. Fu, Jun Journalist of South Daily
(August 19, 2006, Guangzhou, 1.5 hours)
Ms. Zhong, Wenhui Reporter
Mr. Fan, Yuemin Participant (August 19, 2006, Guangzhou, 1.5 hours)

- **The planned Seventh Season (2006)**

Mr. Yan, Chun Chief Supervisor
Mr. Huang, Hong Production Supervisor
Mr. Han, Hui Director
Mr. Wu, Jie Director
Mr. Zhu, Zhiping Producer

- ***Go To the West Following the Footprint of Master Monk Xuan Zang (2006)***

Mr. Yan, Chun Chief Supervisor
Mr. Huang, Hong Production Supervisor
Mr. Shi, Kun Chief Director
Mr. Qin, Jian Camera Operator
Mr. Lin, Jian Producer
Mr. Lin, Tao Postproduction Director
Mr. Mao, Xiaotong Participant (August 17, 2006, Guangzhou, 1 hour)

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

- **General questions for the production team members**
 - What is your role in the production of *The Great Challenge for Survival*?
 - How long have you been involved in *The Great Challenge for Survival* production?
 - What do you think this programme is about?
 - If you don't mind, I'd like to ask about your previous professional background?
 - What kinds of major events happened during productions?
 - What are the unexpected challenges and difficulties you have encountered during the productions?

- **General questions for all the potential interviewees**
 - What kind of audience do you think this series is aimed at?
 - What do you think are the reasons why the survival formula has been very popular in China?
 - Have you watched any similar Western programmes?
 - Do you think it is necessary or important to develop a distinctive "Chinese style" of reality people show form in China?
 - What do you think the characteristics of a 'Chinese style' might be?
 - Do you think this television form can play a role in changing society?
 - Which parts of the programme do you think are distinctively Chinese?
 - Do you think the programmes present the real Chinese ordinary people?
 - What the reasons you think reality show are being made in China at this particular time?
 - Do you think this programme has something to contribute to the development of Chinese society? Can you tell me what you think about that?

➤ **Questions for the producer/director**

- How was *The Great Challenge for Survival* financed?
- Where does the idea for each season come from?
- What kinds of ideas for this season's programme were rejected and why?
- Scholars talk about reality-people shows as having commercial, entertainment and social purposes, which of those are important here?
- What kinds of issues do you consider while making decisions about the shape of the programme?
- How important it is to present 'real' happening and 'real' participants in making this programme?
- How often do you think about the audience when making the programme?
- If you remake what aspect you want to improve? why?
- Are there any outside groups that have influence on what the programme includes or how it is shaped?
- Specifically, is there any guidance from the government about what should be included in the programme?
- How do you recruit participants?
- What kind of people you are looking for? (e.g. age group, gender, personality, educational qualification, particular ability, specific social stratum, other criteria) ?
- Why are these particular qualities important?
- What kinds of people do you think are interested in being involved in the project?
- What do you think are their motivations for doing so?
(e.g. enjoying unique experience, seeking for stardom, competing for reward or other reasons)
- How was *The Great Challenge for Survival* series marketed?
- How important is the idea of "real people's real experience" to the marketing strategy?

- Was *The Great Challenge for Survival* marketed differently in different regions and/or to different audiences?
- Has the marketing approach changed over time?
- How was the series distributed regionally, domestically and overseas?
- How different the popularity of this programme is in television market of different region and country?

➤ **Questions for camera operators**

- Can you describe your work during the filming?
- What kind of relationship do you have with the contestants throughout the filming?

(To discuss whether they tried to establish an intimate relationship to the participants or to keep a certain distance with them in order to maintain the objectivity.)

- How much freedom do you have in deciding what to film?
- How do you ensure their privacy?
- What kinds of situations and moments do you think cannot be missed and why?
- How does the film equipment effect your work, in terms of documenting what happening in front of the camera?

➤ **Questions for the editor**

- Which kind of footage will likely be selected in the initial editing process?
- Do you see this as a show about 'truth' or about entertainment?
- How does that understanding guide the editing?
- Is the programme viewed by a political censor?
- Are there any major changes made before broadcast?
- Who decides what changes are made?
- Are there any specific cases they can remember from previous seasons where changes were made?

- **Questions for the volunteer contestants**

- Would you please introduce yourself? (e.g. name, age, occupation, education received, native place/nationality and marital status)
- What is your motivation for participating in the project?
- Have you had any experience of media production before?
- How did you find out about and access the project?
- Why do you think you were successful in the audition?
- Can you describe your imagination and expectation of this particular TV experience?
- Are there any interest stories and impressive experience you can recall?
- How do you evaluate this experience?
- Whether does this media experience meet your expectations?
- Do you think the programme present a 'real' you on the screen?
- Do you think how this experience has effected on you life after the production?
- Do you consider yourself as a regular viewer or a fan of this programme? Why and why not?
- After your participation of this reality people show, do you think your way of watching and interpreting this kind of television programmes has been changed? What are the differences?

Appendix 4: Data of *TGCF*S

Season	The First Season	The Second Season	The Third Season
Sponsor	Gai zhong gai (pharmaceutical product)	Di hua zhi xiu (shampoo)	Qiaoqiao (Daily Product Enterprise)
Sponsorship	Advertisement	Advertisement	Advertisement & Titling
Production Partner			
Investment of Sponsor	RMB1.7 million	RMB 3 million	RMB 4 million
Total Investment	RMB 3 million	RMB 3 million	RMB 4 million
Total episodes (Cantonese version)	72 episodes (3 episodes per week)	67 episodes (3 episodes per week)	40 episodes (3 episodes per week)
Total episodes (Mandarin version)	72 episodes (3 episodes per week)	55 episodes (3 episodes per week)	30 episodes (3 episodes per week)
Duration of episode (Cantonese version)	8-10 minutes	28 minutes	20 minutes
Duration of episode (Mandarin version)	10 minutes	25 minutes	25 minutes
Time of Debut (Cantonese version)	15/07/2000—01/01/2001	07/2001—11/2001	07/2002—11/2002
Time of Debut (Mandarin version)	17/07/2000—01/01/2001	07/2001—11/2001	07/2002—11/2002
Timeslot (Pearl River Channel)	9pm	9pm	9:30pm
Timeslot (Guangdong Satellite Channel)	10pm	9pm	10:30pm
Launching date of the project	03/2000	03/2001	03/2002
Starting date of the filming	18/06/2000	01/06/2001	07/06/2002

Season	The Four Season	The Fifth Season	The Sixth Season
Sponsor	Go-tone (Telecommunication Service)	Cool-Zone (Telecommunication Service)	Go-tone (Telecommunication Service)
Sponsorship	Advertisement & Titling	Advertisement & Titling	Advertisement & Titling
Production Partner		Vhand Media & Culture Co.,	GZTV, 21CN.com
Investment of Sponsor	RMB 4.5 million	RMB 7 million	RMB 0.5 million (GZTV) RMB 0.5 million (21CN.com)
Total Investment	RMB 5 million	RMB 1.1 million	RMB 5 million
Total episodes (Cantonese version)	38 episodes (4 episodes per week)	32 episodes (3 episodes per week)	30 episodes (3 episodes per week)
Total episodes (Mandarin version)	34 episodes (4 episodes per week)	32 episodes (3 episodes per week)	30 episodes (3 episodes per week)
Duration of episode (Cantonese version)	20 minutes (25minutes Weekend)	45 minutes	30 minutes
Duration of episode (Mandarin version)	20 minutes (25minutes Weekend)	45 minutes	30 minutes
Time of Debut (Cantonese version)	08/2003—23/11/2003	09/2004—11/2004	05/08/2005—25/09/2005 21/10/2005-30/10/2005
Time of Debut (Mandarin version)	07/2003—23/11/2003	09/2004—11/2004	26/09/2005—04/11/2005
Timeslot (Pearl River Channel)	9:30pm	9:45 pm	10:30pm
Timeslot (Guangdong Satellite Channel)	10:30pm	9:30 pm	11:30pm
Launching date of the project	04/2003	04/2004	04/2005
Starting date of the filming	09/08/2003	01/06/2004	23/07/2005